

## **Sermon, 15 February 2026, Church of Scotland Geneva**

Text 1: Proverbs 13: 1 - 9 (taken from New International Version):

A wise son heeds his father's instruction,

but a mocker does not respond to rebukes.

From the fruit of their lips people enjoy good things,

but the unfaithful have an appetite for violence.

Those who guard their lips preserve their lives,

but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.

A sluggard's appetite is never filled,

but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

The righteous hate what is false,

but the wicked make themselves a stench

and bring shame on themselves.

Righteousness guards the person of integrity,

but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

One person pretends to be rich, yet has nothing;

another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.

A person's riches may ransom their life,

but the poor cannot respond to threatening rebukes.

The light of the righteous shines brightly,

but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.

## Text 2: Luke 15: 1 - 10 (taken from New International Version):

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going

on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Do you think that you have much to learn ? The children having gone up to Sunday School by this point in the Service, the average age of the Congregation is probably high enough that the need to learn something new, at least on a frequent basis, may not seem that pressing. It's not that we know it all. We're not arrogant like that. We just maybe think that we know enough by now. At a certain point, discovering a new truth can start to seem like a tiring process.

But is it really ? Or, at least, should it be tiring ? I'm not saying that it isn't necessarily hard work. However, that doesn't make it any the less worthwhile. The Proverbs we heard today explicitly started by saying how a wise offspring would heed the parent's instructions. The next few Proverbs describe what it means to be wise and righteous and the lesson here may actually surprise.

We're told basically to find what we need from what we have. Wise speech is better than trying to build ourselves up with lies and hypocrisy. Understanding what we need and we can deliver is eminently better than trying to gorge ourselves with as much as possible. We need to appreciate who we are and what we can do in order to be righteous. Pretence and false ambition will get us nowhere. As the final Proverb tells us, "The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out."

What is perhaps surprising is that the key to understanding all this seems to rely on the basic premise that we're already good enough. Righteous lives are not something we achieve by learning from outside how to improve ourselves. They're based on honesty and integrity, with an appreciation that we're already good enough. We need the faith in our own, intrinsic potential to learn how to be the best we can be. It's not about learning to be somebody else. It's about learning to be who God made us to be.

That's maybe quite a different lesson than what some would imagine. In fact, it might require a considerably different mindset for some schools of thought in the Church over time. After all, one of the first lessons in the Bible is how people have fallen from grace and since Adam took a bite from the apple in the Garden of Eden, we've all been inherently wicked. Each week, we confess our sins and pray for forgiveness. And indeed we should. Imagining ourselves to be without fault is not a healthy mindset, not least as the behaviour of some of the world's leaders today displays all too unfortunately.

Not only that, but we have sinned so much that God had to send His own Son to die for us in exceptionally horrible circumstances. But wait a minute. That may be true but there's another angle to consider. If we're all so awful, as some firebrand preachers and evangelists love to remind us on a constant basis, then what was the point of God sending His Son to save us? Either there's a bit more to us than just a bunch of lousy sinners or else God wasn't being overly bright across the spectrum from Christmas to Easter. Why go to all that trouble unless actually, there was something, somebody worth saving?

What we need to learn is that of course there are terrible elements in God's people. You'd have to set a new level in naivety to see us all as perfect creations against a background of wars, exploitation, greed, selfishness, cruelty and all the other prime examples of sin we can find so easily without having to look that far. But at the same time, you don't have to look that far either to see charities, to see those whose work is dedicated to relieving suffering, even just to see people helping their neighbours, offering a hand to somebody in the street or running a fundraising event for any of a multitude of good causes. Why is it that we're so overwhelmed by the wrong in us that we have to be reminded to look for what else there is?

When the Prodigal Son returned to his father, his brother saw nothing beyond a wastrel who had squandered his inheritance and accomplished nothing. Yet his father was literally slaughtering the fatted calf to celebrate his return. But when he complained to his father, the response was interesting. There was no doubt that the younger brother had sinned greatly. There was also no doubt that the older brother had been doing the right thing and that was worth the real weight of inheritance too. What the father saw but the older brother did not, was that despite all the wrong, there was still something worthwhile in the younger, prodigal brother. The wrong he had done, and the comparative worth of the older brother did not go away, but neither did they reduce the good in the younger brother.

That is what should be the basis for what need to be learning. We won't learn much if all we ever see is the wrong in the world. We won't find out a great deal if we can't see beyond what we and others get wrong. However, it doesn't take away the significance of that wrong if we are still determined to find the right and the good, and to learn how to make the most of them. God promises to make His Kingdom come when we follow in His way. Looking to that is not to ignore the evil and wrong in people. It's to find what is even stronger and what can be used to overcome that evil and wrong, to be the best we can be, to be the creation God made us to be and sent His Son to let us be.

Jesus Himself hung on the Cross between two bandits, people considered the scum of the earth by even the Roman Empire, which was not noted for its own mercy or selflessness. Yet Jesus told one of them already, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Where evil wins and rules supreme is where nobody wants to learn and everyone assumes that nothing can ever change. It is where people imagine that this is the way things have always been and nothing will ever get better. But that is just giving in. Things can get better. As the father told the older son in Jesus' Parable, "we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." If we can't see beyond the here and now, if we don't want to learn anything, then certainly, we won't see any progress. That is why learning is so important. It gives us a sense of dynamism, hope and purpose. It takes us beyond seeing only where we are now and helps us to look to where we could go if we follow God.

God made us to be good. He has given us an inherent ability to be just that. We might be held back by sin but that doesn't mean that we can't learn to build on that potential for goodness within each of us. The question is, are we going to stay put, looking to what holds us back and sighing in despair? Or are we going to see what God offers us the chance to be and learn to use what He has given us to get there?