

The Lost Opportunity

September 25, 2016

Luke 16: 19-31:

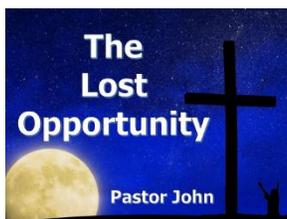
19 There was once a rich man who wore expensive clothes and every day ate the best food. 20 But a poor beggar named Lazarus was brought to the gate of the rich man's house. 21 He was happy just to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. His body was covered with sores, and dogs kept coming up to lick them. 22 The poor man died, and angels took him to the place of honor next to Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. 23 He went to hell and was suffering terribly. When he looked up and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side, 24 he said to Abraham, "Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and touch my tongue. I'm suffering terribly in this fire."

25 Abraham answered, "My friend, remember that while you lived, you had everything good, and Lazarus had everything bad. Now he is happy, and you are in pain. 26 And besides, there is a deep ditch between us, and no one from either side can cross over."

27 But the rich man said, "Abraham, then please send Lazarus to my father's home. 28 Let him warn my five brothers, so they won't come to this horrible place." 29 Abraham answered, "Your brothers can read what Moses and the prophets wrote. They should pay attention to that."

30 Then the rich man said, "No, that's not enough! If only someone from the dead would go to them, they would listen and turn to God." 31 So Abraham said, "If they won't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even to someone who comes back from the dead."

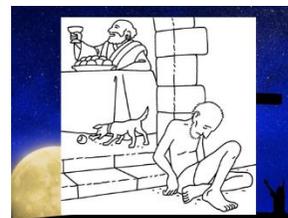


In today's passage we get a look at eternity. We clearly see that for non-believers, it is grim. In Luke 16 we find one of the few passages in the Bible where we get a glimpse into

what heaven or hell will be like or look like. In various passages found throughout the Bible, hell is described as "burning torment", "an everlasting fire", "a lake of burning sulfur", and those there will dwell in "chains of darkness".

Now while this will not be a gloom and doom message today, it is important for us to have an understanding of what our choices in this life lead to in the eternal life to come. In eternal life, we all surely hope to be in heaven. In various passages found in the Bible heaven is described as “a kingdom feast”, “a place with many rooms”, a place where there is “no hunger, no thirst, no tears”, a place where “springs of living water” flow, and there is a sense of being always in the “light of Christ”.

It is important to be aware of our two possible eternal destinations as we wrestle with this parable today. As we do so, we will come to an awareness that at times we are more like Lazarus and at other times we are more like the rich man. We will also look at how we can strive to follow God’s ways and to secure for ourselves and for all people everywhere eternal life in heaven. The choices and decisions we make and how we live this life determines our destination in eternity. Let us pray.



As our parable begins, we find out what life was like on earth for the rich man and for Lazarus. This image depicts it so well. The rich man enjoyed life, always wearing expensive clothes and eating the best food. Lazarus, on the other hand, suffered in life. He was a poor beggar who was brought to the gate of the rich man’s house just in hopes of eating the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. As depicted in the picture, Lazarus was kept outside of the rich man’s presence. The dog at the feet of the rich man’s table is enjoying the scraps while Lazarus sits alone outside the rich man’s home, hoping for something to eat. Over the

course of time, the rich man probably came to pass by Lazarus without even noticing him there. Let us pause for a moment here and consider who we are most like in the parable – the rich man enjoying the blessings of life or Lazarus sitting on the outside? In terms of the blessings we enjoy in our lives, I think a very high percentage of us are much more like the rich man most of the time.



But it also important to note that we differ significantly from the rich man. While I do not believe that anyone here could really argue that any of us are more like the beggar, much of the time we do differ greatly from the rich man. This is a very generous church filled with numerous caring individuals. This church makes important and worthy contributions to our community and to those in need, primarily through the Food Pantry, the Thrift Store, and the various Blue Bucket projects. Just last weekend at the In-Gathering in Pierre, our church donated health kits, school kits, sewing kits, and monetary contributions valued at well over a thousand dollars. In August alone, there were 25 families that received food at the Pantry and five individuals that received needed clothing items at the Thrift Store. As a church and as individuals, we do care about others. We do make a positive difference in the lives of people in our community and beyond.

However. However, however, however. However, when it comes down to it, at times we are also much like the rich man. Who among us does not have adequate clothes to wear and ample food to eat, with some to spare? And who among us have missed opportunities to help another in need? How many of us have had another sitting just outside the gates of our homes lacking adequate

food, shelter, or clothing? How many of us walk by others, like the rich man did with Lazarus, barely noticing another in need? How many of us are unaware of needs that exist right here in Winner or in other nearby communities? So while we as a church and as individuals do much for our brothers and sisters in need, we also must be aware that there is more that can be done. This is especially true in the realm of faith. There are many in our neighborhoods and in our community who do not know the good news of Jesus Christ. They are on the rich man's path.

There was an old recluse who lived deep in the mountains of Colorado. When he died, distant relatives from the city came to collect his valuables. Upon arriving, all they saw was an old shack with an outhouse beside it. Inside the shack, next to the rock fireplace, was an old cooking pot and his mining equipment. A cracked table with a three-legged chair stood guard by a tiny window. A kerosene lamp served as the centerpiece for the table. In a dark corner of the little room was a dilapidated cot with a threadbare bedroll on it. They picked up some of the old relics and started to leave. As they were driving away, an old friend of the recluse, on his mule, flagged them down. "Do you mind if I help myself to what's left in my friend's cabin?" he asked. "Go right ahead," they replied. After all, they thought, "What inside that shack could be worth anything?"

The old friend entered the shack and walked directly over the table. He reached under it and lifted one of the floor boards. He then proceeded to take out all the gold his friend had discovered over the past 53 years –

enough to have built a palace. The recluse died with only his friend knowing his true worth. As the friend looked out of the little window and watched the cloud of dust behind the relative's car disappear, he said, "They should have got to know him better."

The same is true with us and our relationship with Jesus. Once we have chosen to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we do get to know Him better and better. Once we claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are saved. Although we will slip and sin, our status does not change. Once we claim a personal relationship with Jesus, we are saved. To do so, we have to know Him.

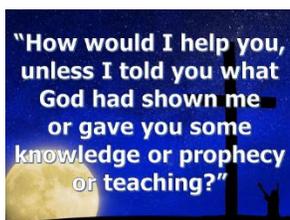
As we consider all of those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, how many do we wish would get to know Him better? The correct answer is: "All of them". In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, we see the eternal consequence of not entering into a personal relationship with Jesus. It is grim. Who of us, each looking forward to eternal life in God's presence, would not want all people to enjoy this same eternity? We hear the torment in the rich man's pleas. Even though it is too late for himself, the rich man comes to realize that this is no place for those he loves. In verses 27 and 28, we hear his plea: *"But the rich man said, "Abraham, then please send Lazarus to my father's home. Let him warn my five brothers, so they won't come to this horrible place."*

But sadly, this is not to be. Jesus, speaking to the religious authorities and disciples gathered there that day, states through Abraham's words, "If they

won't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even to someone who comes back from the dead." It is a grim outlook for those who do not listen to the Words contained in the Holy Scriptures, words that lead us to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Many do not listen.

If I had a dollar for every time I heard a complaint or a comment about how people do not read their Bibles anymore, I would be a rich man. Yet in response, I ask you to think back to the very first time you read your Bible on your own or to think back to a time you read a passage and said, "Huh?" We need to realize that to someone new to the faith and more so to someone who has no faith at all, the Bible can be a tough read. It is to these that we are called. It is to the Lazarus's out there who are starving for spiritual food that we are called. They cannot be a lost opportunity.

Reading from 1 Corinthians 14, verse six:



⁶ My friends, what good would it do, if I came and spoke unknown languages to you and didn't explain what I meant? How would I help you, unless I told you what God had shown me or gave you some knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

If we really want people to come to know Jesus, and to know Him well enough to enter into a personal relationship with Him, we cannot simply hand them a Bible and say, "Here you go". We need to begin teaching the lost about Jesus by first living Jesus out loud in every aspect of our lives. People we encounter must

see, feel, and experience Jesus bright and clear in our words, actions, and deeds. It is through our love and witness that people will become curious and will become interested in knowing what it is that we have that makes us live this way. We must be in the world, but not of the world, if we want people to know Jesus. But we cannot stop here. If we do, it is a lost opportunity.

We must be willing to invest in people's lives. We must be willing to do what Paul says here. We must begin by telling the story of what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives, the story of what God has shown us. And then we must be willing to teach the non-believer about God and His love, about God and His unending mercy, about God and the gift of salvation that leads to eternal life, about having a personal relationship with Jesus. We must be willing to share this amazing gift that we have been given. But it cannot end here because we are all sinners and we all struggle with sin. We cannot leave that new believer out there alone, struggling to reconcile the strong inner pull of temptation that works against this life they are feeling called to lead in Christ.

Think back to when you first became a Christian. Once you came to personally know Jesus Christ, the next big battle is walking the walk. It is here in this book that we gain insight, understanding, and instructions on how to grow in our faith and to become more and more Christ-like. But it is so hard to do this on our own. Our journey of faith is best done in community. Be forewarned, it can be messy. It can be hard. It can be frustrating and challenging. This journey of faith is a walk no one should have to take alone. We must be willing to invest in people's lives. We must be willing to give of ourselves.

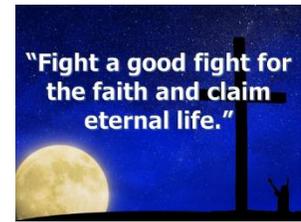


The rich man realized his fate far too late. In his earthly life he came to rely only on his wealth. Last week we learned that we cannot serve both God and *mammon*. We learned that we cannot love two masters. Being more like the rich man than Lazarus, we must be aware of the challenge of stepping out of our comfortable and cozy life to walk alongside those needing to know Jesus Christ. We must be aware of the challenge that separates meeting our needs from filling all of our wants. In writing to Timothy, Paul speaks of this challenge of keeping our faith amidst the pursuits of this earthly life. Reading from 1st Timothy, verses five through ten:

"These people think religion is supposed to make you rich. ⁶ And religion does make your life rich, by making you content with what you have.⁷ We didn't bring anything into this world, and we won't take anything with us when we leave. ⁸ So we should be satisfied just to have food and clothes. ⁹ People who want to be rich fall into all sorts of temptations and traps. They are caught by foolish and harmful desires that drag them down and destroy them. ¹⁰ The love of money causes all kinds of trouble. Some people want money so much that they have given up their faith and caused themselves a lot of pain."

Faith makes us content. Faith helps us to be satisfied with what we have. Wealth tempts us and causes all sorts of troubles. It can even lead us to give up our faith. When we lose focus on God, we lose focus on what matters. Paul goes on to encourage Timothy and to encourage us. Reading verses eleven through twelve:

"¹¹ Timothy, you belong to God, so keep away from all these evil things. Try your best to please God and to be like him. Be faithful, loving, dependable, and gentle. ¹² Fight a good fight for the faith and claim eternal life."



Claim our faith. Keep away from temptation and evil. Please God in how we live our life. Be faithful and loving and gentle. Why? When we fight the good fight for the faith, then we will claim eternal life in heaven with Jesus.

Why are we called to fight the good fight? Yes, partly so that we may one day enter our eternal rest. But we also fight the good fight so that others may one day enter their eternal rest as well. We are Jesus' hands and feet, his Word lived out loud, His light shining into the darkness so that all may come to know the love and saving grace found in the good news of the world, so that they too may enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. May we walk the walk alongside our brothers and sisters who do not know Jesus, so that all may one day know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. May we fight the good fight. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Who are those sitting “outside our house”, hungry and poor, while we dine on fine food in our nice clothes?
- 2) How do you live your daily life as a witness to the faith you have and to the good news you find in Jesus Christ?
- 3) How would you answer the question: what did and does Jesus Christ do for my life? What would be your two-minute elevator speech for Christ?
- 4) This week, think about someone who needs to experience the hands and feet, the light and love of Christ. Pray about how you could be this for this person in the week ahead.