

I don't have much patience for people who are selective in whom they will and will not associate with. In other words, it bugs me when relationships are based entirely on the question, "What can you do for me?" Alisha and I have learned that when we move we find out who our real friends are. Serving different churches we have the opportunity to meet a lot of different people, and it is one of the joys of being in ministry. One of the difficult things about being itinerant is that it's difficult to build long-lasting relationships. However, we have a few friends from churches we have served who continue to keep up with us. They are true friends. They love us not because we served in their church, but for who we are. Just as it has been a joy to continue those relationships, we have also noticed that it works the other way as well. People that we thought would keep in contact with us have not. Granted, we are the ones who have physically moved, but that shouldn't mean that we break off all contact as if we have moved to Australia. You may have experienced the same thing in your life. Some people will be your friend as long as you satisfy a need of theirs, but a true friend is one who wants to be in relationship with us no matter what.

I'm guessing the rich man in this story only associated with those who could do something for him. It's probably not too far-fetched to assume that he only invited his special friends to the house for dinner. Luke tells us that he dressed in purple (the color of royalty) and fine linen, and that he feasted sumptuously every day. I love that word sumptuously. It makes we want to go to lunch right now. Could someone say a prayer and hit the lights? Never mind, we better go on with the sermon. So picture the scene – this rich man is dressed to the hilt and eating high on the hog, while all the while there sits a poor man named Lazarus at his gate. Remember, the rich man lives in a gated community to keep out the "undesirables" like Lazarus. He wouldn't want his property value to go down! There is no indication that this Lazarus is the same Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead. He was just a poor, sick man covered with sores. His situation was so sad that even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

Well, one day the inevitable happened – Lazarus died. Oddly enough, the rich man also died. What a reminder to us all that death does not discriminate. It happens to the best of us. I find it fascinating what happened when these two men died. I love how Luke tells the story: "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham." Here is how he described the death of the rich man: "The rich man also died

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and was buried.” You would think the descriptions would be reversed. After all, the rich man was used to riding in limos, chartered jets, etc. If anyone should be carried away by the angels, it should be the rich man, right? Wrong. It’s the poor man who gets the ride of his life on the wings of angels. In an instant he went from sitting in the hot sun with dogs licking his sores, to being escorted into the presence of God.

I have a friend who is a pastor and she has not only served in the local church, but also as a chaplain at Parkland Hospital in Dallas. As you can imagine, she has seen some pretty rough cases. We were talking one day about a man who came into the emergency with a cut. He was perfectly healthy, besides the cut on his hand. The cut was not life-threatening. In fact, all it required was a few stitches. But as the man was waiting to see the doctor he died. It makes you ask, “How can a seemingly healthy person be living and breathing and talking one minute, and be dead the next?” My friend made the comment, “We are alive until the moment we die.” How true it is.

A few years ago I was playing in the back yard with Benjamin when we heard and felt a loud boom. At first I thought it was an accident on Highway 31 near our house, but learned later that it was not accident near our house, but an explosion far away. The Columbia space shuttle had exploded as it was returning to earth. You may remember all the debris that was found from the space shuttle around the state, especially in East Texas. I thought to myself, “They didn’t even see it coming. In a second their lives vanished.”

We are alive on this earth one second and the very next we could easily be carried away on the wings of angels to be with our Savior. Or, as in the case of the rich man, we may not get to take that joyful ride with the angels and end up in a place far different than the presence of God. The rich man ended up in that place. The text refers to it as Hades. In those days it meant the eternal home of the wicked. We call it Hell. Now I don’t know what your conception of Hell is. Maybe you have the idea that it is a fiery pit, with a devil who walks around with a pitchfork. Fortunately, I’m not qualified to describe what Hell is like. I’ve never been there and don’t plan on making the trip, but I do believe that there is a place where those who have rejected God will spend eternity and there will be great anguish over a missed opportunity to be in paradise with God. From the looks of the rich man’s description, I think I’d rather spend eternity with God.

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You know we well enough now to know that I am the furthest thing from a hell, fire, and brimstone preacher. I do not believe that is the best way to share the good news of Jesus Christ. I believe people respond much more favorably to the message of God's grace, instead of a message based on fear tactics. However, even for a laid back preacher like me there comes a time when you must stand before the congregation and say point blank, "Some of us will choose God and life, and others will not."

Obviously, the rich man did not choose God and life, nor did he choose to live a life of service and care for others. And in case you haven't noticed, the two are closely linked. If we choose God and the life that God intends us to live, then we choose to be servants and to care for those in need. The rich man never bothered to invite Lazarus inside for supper, but now he is begging Abraham to send Lazarus with some water. Suddenly, Lazarus has become important to the rich man. Not because the rich man has had a change in heart, but because Lazarus is now in the position to do something for him.

Luke tells this story so well. I love the part where Abraham and the rich man are having a discussion. The rich man begged that Lazarus could be sent to give him some water, but Abraham said it was not possible because a great chasm has been fixed between people like Lazarus and the rich man. After the rich man came to understand that his fate had been sealed, he said to Abraham, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment."

Have you ever warned someone about something only to have him or her ignore your warnings? All you seasoned parents out there can relate to what I'm talking about. Think about all the advice you have given your children, only to have them ignore it. Or perhaps you are in a position at work where you are responsible for training new employees and you too know the frustration of others not listening to good advice. You give them advice based on experience and it's designed to help them, not you, and they still don't listen. You have told them time and time again to put the paper in the copier a certain way, but do they listen? No! They put the paper in the copier their way – the wrong way! It's one of the most frustrating things to deal with. My wife is an absolute saint because she has to put up with a husband who does everything the hard way. If I had a dollar for all the times she has bailed me out by saying, "Honey, try it this way," I would be a rich man. I will listen to advice after I have failed 100 times doing it may way. I

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just have to prove to myself through repeated failure that my way may not be the right way.

The rich man's fate had been sealed. He had his opportunity on earth to live according to the ways of God and he missed out. So he did the natural thing. He begged for his brothers who were still living to be warned and he wanted none other than good ole' Lazarus to warn them. But Abraham said that was not possible. Abraham said that his brothers had the same opportunity he had. They could find life through Moses and the prophets. The rich man argued that it would be better to send someone from the dead. Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Of course he was referring to Jesus at that point.

This is a sad, sad story because it's not as if the rich man didn't have the opportunity to experience and share God's love. In fact, the opportunity presented itself every day at his gate and that opportunity was named Lazarus. I really believe that it matters to God what we do on this earth. I do not believe that we do good things and love others to get God to love us. On the contrary, God loves us first and we simply respond to God's love for us by loving others in return, but if we refuse to love others, especially the poor and disadvantaged, then we have not loved God. So who are our Lazarus' today? Who are those people that God has placed in our lives for us to either love or ignore?

I can't think of a better example than the guys in our backyard – literally. I'm talking about the Lifehouse guys. These are guys who are recovering from drug and alcohol abuse. Yes, a lot of their problems have been brought on by themselves, but that is beside the point. When we get in the business of judging who is worthy of help and love based on whose "fault" it is then we are treading on thin ice. Now I will be the first to tell you that I do not believe in enabling people to continue to live a life in sin. We have people come into the church office off the streets on a daily basis. Most of them are drug addicts looking for a few bucks to buy more drugs. We do not give them money. It would be irresponsible for us to give them money to continue a lifestyle that is destructive. But what we do offer them is assistance in getting their lives back together again. If they need to be directed to a shelter or a ministry like the Lifehouse and genuinely want to change, then we help them. To be honest with you, there are a lot of con artists who go from church to church preying on churches. They travel from

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church to church with some sad story hoping to make a few dollars off an unsuspecting church secretary or pastor.

One evening we were having an administrative board meeting when a guy walked in off the street. He came in crying. I could tell right away he was a fake. He said that he needed some money for a bus fare so he could make it to his grandmother's funeral in Virginia. I had a funny feeling about this guy from the get go so I asked him, "What's your grandmother's name?" He thought for a second and then came up with some fake name – I think it was Mabel or something. I replied, "Here is what I will do. You call the funeral home in Virginia and have them fax me a copy of your grandmother's death certificate. In addition to the death certificate, I want something in writing about the time of the funeral. If you produce those two things I'll not only pay for your bus fare to Virginia, but I will pay for you to get back home." The man stumbled around claiming that he forgot the name of the funeral home. Finally, I said, "Look, if you want help and want to help yourself we can get you some help, but we are not going to let you rip off this church so you can go down a six pack or shoot up on the corner." At that point he realized that I was not as compassionate as most pastors and he left as quick as he came in! So the next time you are in a major city and you have a panhandler asking for money and you say, "No", don't feel guilty about it. It's okay to say no to con artists, but as the rich man learned in our story, it's not okay to ignore people who really could use a helping hand.

I don't know who the Lazarus's are in your life. We all have them. For some of us it might be that neighbor down the street that needs a friend. He annoys everyone and no one else will pay any attention to him, but he comes by it honestly. He just has trouble fitting in. Who will be his friend when no one else will? Or maybe our Lazarus is a family in town who has fallen on hard times. For whatever reason they are not making ends meet and we know that they are doing the best they can. Who will give them a bag of groceries or take their car to the gas station and fill it up for them?

Several years ago I read a story about a lady who retired and do you know what she does in her retirement? She drives cancer patients to get their cancer treatments. These are people who for whatever reason cannot afford to drive the distance to get cancer treatments and this lady who worked her whole life to have a little time to do what she wanted to do, cannot think of anything better to do with her retirement years than drive people back and forth from the hospital. I don't know what kind of car she drives, but I do know this, she will one day have the ride of her life on the

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wings of angels. And when she gets to heaven, maybe God will say to her, "Well done my good and faithful servant," there is a spot right over there by Lazarus. Make yourself at home.