

The First Sunday after Trinity  
Luke 16:19-31

Can you tell if someone is a Christian by outward appearance?

Not always.

Your eternal standing with God is a matter of faith. "He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16)

We can see baptism. We usually know if someone is baptized or not. Although, if I walk through the grocery store, I cannot visibly see whether someone is baptized or not baptized. Many protestants have turned baptism into an external work of obedience. Consequently, they reject infant baptism. Jesus obviously says in John 3 that you must be baptized. Jesus equates being born again with water baptism. In John 3:3 and 3:5, He makes the exact same statement twice and equates being born again with being born of water and the Spirit. Being born of water and the Spirit is nothing other than water baptism. And there is no other kind of baptism. To be baptized in water with the Word of God is to be baptized into the Spirit. Furthermore, when Jesus establishes the church at the end of Matthew, He instructs His church to make new disciples by baptism and teaching.

Now certainly baptism is an external act. Water and the Word of God are applied to you externally and God does a wonderful internal work. He bestows His Spirit and creates faith. Peter is bold in His first epistle to say that "baptism now saves you." (1 Peter 3:21) He credits this incredible work not to the obedience of the Christian but to the work of God. Peter says:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through

the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5)

He fully credits your salvation to the mercy of God the Father through the work of Jesus in His life, death, and resurrection. God the Father is the cause of your salvation. It is through the power of the resurrection of Jesus. And it is an inheritance for you. You certainly don't earn an inheritance. It is a pure gift.

And later in that same epistle, Peter says, "Baptism now saves you." So, Peter is equating the merciful saving work of God with baptism. To say that "Jesus saves you" and to say that "Baptism now saves you" is saying the same thing. But this doesn't mean you cannot reject your baptism. Peter says in his second epistle:

"For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'" (2 Peter 2:20-22)

If the baptized think they can live however they want, they are in for a big surprise come judgment day. They will hear this terrifying word from Jesus: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matthew 7:23) The fact that Jesus and all the New Testament writers have warnings about falling away from the faith is a dire warning to all of us to guard our faith.

But again, I cannot see if some random person is baptized. I should be able to tell by their conduct, but that's not always the case. We absolutely should be known as Christians by our works:

Jesus says, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

James says, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22)

Peter says, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct." (1 Peter 1:14-15)

John says, "By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:16-18)

It's clear that we should act as Christians, but Paul slaps us in the face with the reality of the Christian life:

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."  
(Romans 7:18-19)

How many times do you succumb to temptation?

How many times do you not do something you know you should do?

To turn it around, how much do you know about that other person you're condemning when they fail to live up to a Christ-like standard?

Do you know what their struggles are?

We cannot see faith in the heart. We can see actions. And far too often, we judge un-righteously. We judge ourselves way too kindly by judging our intentions instead of our actions. We judge others way too harshly by judging their actions by every jot and tittle of the law.

We see two men in the Gospel reading today. We see very little of their lives.

We see that one man is rich and one man is poor. This tells us very little of their spiritual condition. It is true that riches are a great temptation to evil. Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24) But Abraham and Job and David and Joseph of Arimathea show us that riches alone don't exclude you from the kingdom of God. And it is foolish to think that poverty alone makes you immune to the temptation of Mammon. How many poor are consumed with the thought of money and security? The state lotteries make their money on the backs of the poor! Both rich and poor alike are tempted to put their trust in Mammon instead of God. So, the richness of the rich man and the poorness of Lazarus don't tell us anything about their situation.

We do see in the text that the rich man "was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." (v. 19) This tells us that he might not be a believer. And the destitute state of Lazarus at the rich man's gate might tell us that the rich man isn't generous at all. Now certainly, both the rich man and Lazarus are circumcised which is the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament. But the rich man doesn't appear to be living as if he's circumcised. And we know that since he went to hell, he had indeed rejected the faith of his youth. And we know that Lazarus was trusting God by desiring the scraps from the rich man's table. He was

trusting a “mask” of God, which we’ll talk about in six weeks with the feeding of the 4,000.

We do see the outcome of both men’s faith. The rich man goes to hell. And Lazarus goes to heaven, also known as Abraham’s bosom.

Hell is a horrible place. And Jesus talks about it a lot.

He says it is a place of eternal torment (Luke 16:23).

Hell is a place of unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43).

Hell is a place where the worm does not die (Mark 9:48).

Hell is a place where people will gnash their teeth in anguish and regret (Matt. 13:42).

From today’s Gospel, we learn that hell is a place from which there is no return (Luke 16:19–31).

Jesus calls hell a place of “outer darkness” (Matt. 25:30), comparing it to “Gehenna” (Matt. 10:28), which was a trash dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was burned, and maggots abounded.

Jesus talks about hell so much not to terrify us but to warn us. Hell is a stark reality awaiting all unbelievers *and* those who reject their baptism! And, as you know already, hell wasn’t created for us but for the devil and his angels. Jesus has paid the price for everyone’s sin. There’s no reason anyone must go to hell. But if they don’t believe in Jesus or reject Him, hell is their final, eternal destination. And it’s irreversible.

We don’t want to believe in the reality of hell or in the reality of our original sin. Deep down, we want to believe that people are basically good. But the reality is that we are born “without the fear of God, without trust in

God, and with the inclination to sin.” (AC II) We confess in our confessions:

“It is true that Christians should regard and recognize the actual transgression of God’s commandments as sin; but sin is also that horrible, dreadful hereditary sickness by which the entire human nature is corrupted. This should above all things be regarded and recognized as sin indeed. Yes, it is the chief sin, which is a root and fountainhead of all actual sins. By Dr. Luther it is called a “nature sin” or “person sin.” He says this to show that, even if a person would not think, speak, or do anything evil (which, however, is impossible in this life, since the fall of our first parents), his nature and person are nevertheless sinful. Before God they are thoroughly and utterly infected and corrupted by original sin, as by a spiritual leprosy. Because of this corruption and because of the fall of the first man, the human nature or person is accused or condemned by God’s Law. So we are by nature the children of wrath, death, and damnation, unless we are delivered from them by Christ’s merit.” (SD I.1)

There are many who reject original sin. The doctrine of hell and original sin are very uncomfortable! We want to pretend there’s a second chance if we only knew better.

The rich man plays this card from hell.

“And [the rich man] said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (vv 27-31)

If his brothers only knew the reality of hell, they would surely repent! Furthermore, it's like a passive-aggressive dig at the God's righteousness and justice... certainly, if the rich had known the reality of hell, he would certainly have repented! Furthermore, if he or his brothers saw something miraculous, they would certainly repent! But Abraham gives the harsh truth that if someone rejects the word of God, they reject God Himself.

This original sin plagued the rich man and Lazarus. As Israelites, both were raised hearing the law of God and the promises of God. The rich man rejected the Law and Promise, and Lazarus believed them. You and I were born in original sin. You have heard the law and promises of God and you believe. There is no other way to salvation except through the word of Christ.

This should encourage us to be more bold in evangelizing in two ways. First, we know that it's of the utmost importance for every man, woman, and child. The reality of man's condition before God and the reality of hell should encourage all of us to speak the truth boldly to all our family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. Second, we know that the Holy Spirit works through the word of God to create living faith. This should encourage us to rely on God's word instead of our own. And obviously, the better we know God's Word, the better we will be at sharing it!

But Jesus gives us two caveats. First, we should be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Jesus sends you out as sheep to be slaughtered. (Matthew 10:16) Wisdom and discernment are required to share the Word of God in a winsome way at the appropriate time. You don't want to sound like a one-note shrill harpy and turn people off. May God grant all of us wisdom and discernment. Second, we are fishing for men. When you fish, the equipment and environment need to be right. Furthermore, you need to know fish. Fools shouting Bible verses on street corners or parking lots catch no one. May God grant all of us wisdom and insight into the human condition and into the word of God which is able to make us wise unto salvation. (2 Timothy 3:15)

You are all priests. This means two things. First, you have access to God. He promises to hear your prayers and to answer them. Second, you have the authority to share the word of God. So, this week during your meditations, think of someone in your life who is an unbeliever. Start praying for them and start thinking of ways you may *winsomely* share the Word of God with them. And remember that conversion of adults always takes a long time. Longer than you might think. Do not give up hope.

You have a living hope! You trust in Jesus and you will be rewarded. No matter the conditions you have in this life, you have the same consolation awaiting you that came to Lazarus. A new heavens and a new earth where death and suffering have no dominion. We cannot even imagine how awesome our new, eternal home will be. Let me leave you with the words of Paul quoting Isaiah:

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him.”

May God grant all of us a steadfast, living hope in God, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.