



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

The Fifth Sparrow

Luke 12:6-7

^{NIV} **Luke 12:6**...Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. ⁷ Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

The penny here in this passage is a tiny Roman copper coin called the *assarion*. It is hard to place a modern day value on this little coin but it was just about the least valuable coin the Romans produced. That is perhaps the reason why the translators of the NIV chose the word “**penny**” to translate it. It was worth, in our money, maybe a half a cent, maybe a whole penny, maybe even a little more but the point is the same. The five sparrows described in verse 6 are not worth very much money and yet for all their worthlessness, for all their inherent smallness, they are not forgotten by God.

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Now, the title of the sermon came from a message I heard Dr. W.A. Criswell, the venerable old pastor of First Baptist Dallas, preach one Sunday night almost twenty-five years ago. In his sermon, Dr. Criswell compared what the Lord said about sparrows in Matthew's gospel and what the Lord says about them in the passage before us this morning from Luke. And while this sermon is my own I

want you to know that my thoughts have been fueled and influenced by the memory of Dr. Criswell's words even though almost twenty-five years have passed since first hearing them.

Now this was the essence of Dr. Criswell's observation. In Matthew 10:29, our Lord said this, **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father."** Then in the passage we have just read He says this, **"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?"**

Now, obviously, the passages are similar. Both passages are set in the context of Christians confessing their faith before men. Both passages deal with the God's superintending care and knowledge. Both passages concern the tiniest and weakest of birds; both passages mention pennies. But if you look at the arithmetic of the two passages, it doesn't quite work out. You see if two sparrows cost a penny, then two pennies...two pennies ought to buy four sparrows.

Two sparrows cost a penny. Then for two pennies a person ought to get four sparrows. But the Lord says, **"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?"**

That fifth sparrow, you see, is extra, thrown in for nothing, just to seal the sale – just to pacify, just to comfort a poor person spending their last precious penny on food.

Now, because I worked in retail for many years, that struck me as a wonderfully insightful observation but it didn't grab me by the heart until Dr. Criswell told this little story to make that idea come alive for his listeners and it worked, I

think, because I still remember it almost verbatim now some twenty-five years later. This is what he said.

I can just imagine in my mind, in that day when Jesus lived; I can imagine an ancient Jewish woman. Let's say her name is Martha; an ancient Jewish woman named Martha. And she is making her track to the market where the poor buy, walking up a steep narrow alley of a street. And she comes to a little place almost like a cubbyhole in the corner, where a meat-market man sells meat to the poor.

The meat-market man already knows exactly what she is going to buy. For she has been there many, many times before, this poor woman named Martha. So, as she stands there before the little market, she looks at all of the meat. And she prices the lamb, and the beef and all of the pigeons and turtledoves and at last the sparrows. And after she goes through all of that ritual, as she has time without number, she reaches down and takes her apron. And she unties a little knot in her apron and takes out a small Roman copper coin, one penny. And she lays it on the counter, to buy two sparrows. And the meat keeper pushes across the counter two sparrows that Martha buys with a penny. Then the ancient poor woman, Martha, unties another knot in her apron and takes out another copper coin, another penny. And she puts it on the counter. And when she does, the meat keeper pushes across the counter two more sparrows. **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?"** he asks. Then Martha asks in a ritual so oft-time repeated, as to be lifted almost to a proverb, **"But sir, are...are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?"** So, that man who has the little shop takes a fifth sparrow and he pushes it across the counter for Martha that the sale might be sealed and the purchase might be made.

Now that was Dr. Criswell's story and you can see, I think, the humanity of it. It put a face, a human face, on a timeless truth and it is a timeless truth that we need perhaps as never before to append to our hearts today. You see that fifth sparrow then was just thrown in for nothing, just thrown in to complete a purchase. And yet the Lord seeing that transaction, pointed out that fifth sparrow and said, **"God has not forgotten one of those sparrows. He has not forgotten the four and He has not even forgotten that fifth sparrow, that one that is so small, so insignificant, and so worthless."**

You see the Lord knew even that fifth sparrow intimately. He remembered the moment it was conceived. He remembered the many hours its anxious mother tended the egg that contained it, guarding it from rain and predators and cold winds. And He remembered the day, the very moment that that egg hatched and He counted with interest the endless trips its mother made flitting back and forth anxiously passing food from its beak to this small, tiny, insignificant bird.

He remembered its first venture out of the nest. He remembered its racing heart as it dropped over the side of its nest and He remembered how a tiny neurotransmitter in its tiny brain instantly, almost magically, sprang to life stimulating the right muscles at exactly the right time and forcing its tiny wings to explode into flight. He remembered that, of course, because He ordained it to be. He ordained even the very first seconds of its first flight and He ordained even the joy it felt as it soared into the heavens.

Now the Lord Jesus pointed that out not solely to comment on our Heavenly Father's micromanagement of Creation. He does indeed know every detail of the

life of every sparrow. He knows the sparrows by name and provides for their needs. He cares for them and watches over them the whole course of their short, little lives and knows every single detail of their lives and yet here is the wonder of all wonders, He views them as next to nothing compared to you. Surely that is the point He is making when He says, **“Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”**

You see, the Lord willingly and caringly superintends the lives of sparrows, even this fifth sparrow, out of an obligation to faithfully discharge His responsibility as Creator and Sustainer of the universe but He superintends your life and sustains your life and remembers your life because you are made in His image and because as a Christian, you are bought and redeemed and connected to the thing He loves most of all, His own dear Son.

So the teaching of our Lord concerning this fifth sparrow is this. What apparently is small and worthless and forgotten by the world is dear and precious to the heart of God.

Now, I don't know about you but I need to hear that message from time and time. I need to hear that message as a Christian man, woman, boy or girl so I will think of myself rightly and I need to hear it so that I will think rightly of the other men, women, boys and girls around me. Sometimes, and I say this to my shame, I need to hear that message just so that I will think of them at all. You see I need to hear that message from time to time because there are so many other voices in our world arguing for our worthlessness. For one thing, the vastness of creation argues for our worthlessness. The immensity of space and the vastness of creation argue for our smallness and our inconsequential nothingness. There are great galaxies out there, billions of times bigger than our Milky Way and some of

those galaxies are so far away that light, traveling at a hundred eighty-six thousand miles a second, will take billions and billions of years to get there. And in this creation, our own galaxy, our own Milky Way, as big as it is, doesn't take up much more than just one tiny insignificant corner of that universe. And in our own Milky Way, our earth is a not much more than a tiny, inconsequential speck. And on this earth, we live and die and have our being in one distant, remote isolated corner of a vast creation. So then, the vastness of creation argues for our smallness, for our worthlessness. But it is not just the vastness of creation arguing for our insignificance; the brevity of life argues for it as well. I used to think that a man that was fifty years old was an old man, a very old man. Now I think of a fifty year old man as not much more than a pup. It seems to me now that fifty years, which used to seem like such a long time, is not really very long at all. Looking back, I think that it has taken me just about fifty years to get my thoughts organized.

Of course, the humanistic teaching that lies back of all this modern bleakness is the philosophical system called existentialism. It argues that man is nothing much more than a cosmic accident; that he is nothing more than momentary, shimmering bubble floating on a sea of nothingness. It argues that creation was an accident and that man, as an individual has no real significance. It argues that there is no purpose and there is no worth and there is no reason back of life. It argues that we live as orphans. It argues that we are alone in the universe. It argues that how things are, ultimately do not matter. There's no meaning and no purpose to anything.

So many, many things argue for our worthlessness: the vastness of creation, the

brevity of life, and the underlying philosophy of our age. And yet against those things stand these sure and wonderful words of the Lord Jesus, **“Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”**

You see, the Christian faith contends that every man is made in the image of God. The Christian faith says that the soul of every Christian is of infinite matter and worth to the Lord God who made us. The Christian faith says that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, came into the world to die for the humblest and the poorest and the frailest of sinners and that because of that compassion and tenderness and mercy are the great, heroic and essential traits of life. And the teaching of our Lord is that this fifth sparrow, thrown across the table, as though it were nothing to consummate a purchase, seemingly worthless is anything but that. It is precious in His sight and worthy of our time and affection.

Who are those fifth sparrows? Well, for one thing a little child is a fifth sparrow. That is why I am so grateful for every Sunday school teacher we have who is willing to invest his or her time or energy in the biblical training of our children.

I am grateful for every man, woman, boy or girl that is willing to forgo a Saturday night movie and give over their evening to the preparation of a Sunday school lesson or who is willing to take a turn in our nursery. I am grateful to every adult and every teenager that is willing to work in our Vacation Bible School. I am grateful to every parent that stops by some house or apartment on the way to church and picks up a kid who would otherwise go spiritually untended. I am grateful for every mentor that is willing to take an hour a month and give it over to the life of one of our elementary kids or teenagers. Because

when they do, when they give over their time and their attention to one of these children, they are saying, **“You know you are significant...you are significant to the Lord Jesus and when someone down the road tells you that you don’t matter you tell them that it is a lie because you matter to the Lord Jesus and you matter to me.”**

Blessed is the church that will magnify its care and ministry to little children.

Blessed is the church that will magnify its care and ministry to teenagers.

Blessed are the mom and dad who will be faithful to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Blessed is the man or woman that is willing to intervene in a child’s life in hope of breaking the cycle of unbelief.

Why are such people blessed? They are blessed because these precious little children are near and dear to the heart of God. They are blessed because they see as important that which God sees as important.

You know I don’t think I remember a single sermon my pastor ever preached when I was growing up. But I’ll tell you what I do remember. I remember him shaking my hand like I was a man. I remember him holding my forehead over a trashcan while I threw up during Sunday school. I remember him smiling and winking at me during the hymns. I remember him visiting me in the hospital when I broke my arm. I remember him coming by my parent’s house and borrowing my dad’s pickup and always taking the time to speak to me just like I was a real man. I remember him acknowledging my presence and worth.

You see children are fifth sparrows. Sometimes they are small and overlooked but they are near and dear and precious in the sight of God. But there are other sparrows...so many other sparrows. Sometimes, an old man or an old woman that the world has forgotten can be a fifth sparrow. How easy for us to neglect and to forget those who in days past were the stalwarts and champions of our faith. How easy that is to do especially now that some of them are old and some of them are feeble? And yet they are more precious to God now than they have ever been and when you get them alone and listen to them talk you can see why.

When you get them alone and hear them talk about the Lord you suddenly realize that this frail little old man or woman is really and truly a spiritual giant trapped in much too small a body. I don't know how many times I have sat in some older saints living room and thought to myself, **"You know this little old woman has the heart of a lion"** or **"You know this little old man has the Wisdom of Solomon."** Yet so many times in our culture there are tendencies to take older people and push them aside, and forget them. There is a tendency in modern churches to say, **"You know they just don't fit our target demographic or they are too old or too set in their ways or too much maintenance."** And when I hear that sort of thing, I think to myself, **"You know shouldn't our target demographic look like the Lord's target demographic? Shouldn't our target demographic have a few sparrows in it? "**

That is why I am so grateful to be a part of a church that is willing to invest his energy and its time and even its money in caring for its seasoned saints. Bless the church and the leaders of the church that honor its older Christians? Bless the men and women, boys and girls that go out of their way to speak to older saints

and encourage them and pray for them and call them and check on them when they are ill or discouraged.

You know I don't think he would let me tell you this if he were here but one of the great memories of my Christian life is the memory I have of something Tom Ferrell did the night Morris Wise died. For those of you that did not know him, Morris Wise was Avis Brice's dad and he became a Christian when he was around eighty. Anyway by this time Morris was in his mid-eighties and dying of cancer and had slipped into a coma and the hospice lady trying to prepare Avis and the those of us that were there at her house told us that he was going to die soon and Tom Ferrell pulled up a chair and opened his Bible to Hebrews eleven and begin to read. It is hard for me to describe what an extraordinary moment it was. Tom's voice was no much louder than a whisper. But he sat there and he read to Morris softly, slowly and deliberately and he directed his words toward him as if Morris were wide-awake and sitting up. Tom read all of chapter eleven and I think part of chapter twelve but the part I particularly remember was when he read this:

^{NIV} **Hebrews 11:13**...All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Now, I cannot tell how that endeared Tom to me and I cannot tell you how grateful I was to be there and how grateful I am to serve with a brother that is so willing to invest his time and energy and heart in one of God's sparrows. Now

why did he take the time to do that? He did it because he knew that what apparently is small and worthless and forgotten by the world is dear and precious to the heart of God.

Now there are no doubt dozens and dozens of other kinds of people here that could be considered to be **“fifth sparrow”** kind of people. And no doubt along the way we have missed some of you and some of you are feeling neglected or overlooked. I apologize for that. I know some of you are aliens in a strange land. I know that some of you are long way from home. I know some of you have lost your mates along the way. I know some of you are under tremendous financial pressure. I know some of you are struggling to find jobs and even a sense of meaning in life. I know some of you are single parents. I know some of you have broken relationships with your parents and some of you have broken relationships with your children. I know some of you are just lonely and it is our duty to seek you out and draw you in and to speak peace to you where we can, when we can. But let me say this to you, **“The Lord Jesus is faithful even when we are not. If you are in Christ, you are secure and He knows your name and watches out over you with much greater care, tenderness and insight than we ever could.”**

Now because that is true I suspect that He may give you strength to even look beyond your own need and meet the need of some other sparrow on the way.”

Let’s pray...

Our God and Our King,

We are so grateful for your loving care over us, for the way you watch out over us and superintend our lives. Oh God, how grateful we are. And when we become discouraged, it is only because we have forgotten what we ought to have remembered. So grant now that your Holy Spirit may take and append these wonderful words of truth from your Holy Word to our hearts, that we might be sustained this day, and tomorrow and the next and that we might be able to look beyond our own lives to those around us to give them mercy and care and comfort. God grant that we pray, grant that in Christ's holy name. Amen.

You know I thought about how I might tie this wondrous supper to the message and I thought to myself, **"You know I'll make mention that this sparrow food."** That's clever, isn't it? it's clever; it's just that it is wrong. You see this is not sparrow food; this is food for the children of God. This is a banquet table and every time we come and eat this meal together we are reminded of his love and mercy to us.

Many of you know that my mom has Alzheimer's or dementia. Whenever, I go to visit her sometimes she knows me and sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes she thinks I am my dad. Sometimes she thinks I am her brother. Sometimes she thinks...I don't know what she thinks; she may think I am a revenue. But I remember one time before she got so bad, I was driving around with her and she was having one of those special days of lucidness and I put my hand over on her arm and said to her, **"Momma, you know I love you"** and she looked back at me and it was one of the last thoroughly lucid things she ever said to me, she said, **"You know I'll try to remember that."**

That's what this supper does. The Lord God is leaning down over the portals of heaven and saying to each and every one of your hearts, **"You know what? I love you, my child."** And when we eat this bread, and when we drink this cup, we are saying to ourselves, **"Lord, we are trying to remember that."**

Oh brothers and sisters, may He speak peace to your souls today. As you take this bread, remember that you are the beloved children of God. Of course, having said that, I have to say, **"This is bread and drink for God's children. If you have not cast your hope on Christ, if you are not united somewhere to the people of God this is not for you."**

Sit and watch it pass by but as you do, ask yourself this question, **"Is there any reason why one more day should pass before I should put my hope in Christ?"** The answer brothers and sisters is, **"No, there is no reason at all. Cast your care upon Him for he has promised us that whoever comes to Him will never be turned away."**

Let's pray.

Oh God,

Make this table real to us. Let us see what it is...precious food and care and sustenance from You on high and as we receive it in faith, Oh God, take it and warm our hearts and draw us to You in a new and special way. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.