



Only In Horseshoes

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 10: 8-11

[Jesus said,] “Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that cling to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’”

“The kingdom of God has come near” - that was the message the people in those towns and villages heard. The kingdom was near-by. It was real close. Do you think coming close was good enough for those people?

What do you think?

When I was in high school, our boys basketball team came close to winning the state championship in Ohio. We only lost by two points. We came real close to being champs.

The Buffalo Bills almost won their first Super Bowl game. The winning kick was only about two feet to the right of the goal post. That was real close.

Last Thursday night Peyton Manning almost brought his team back to tie the Patriots and have a chance of winning. He came real close to doing it, but he just missed when time ran out.

They all came close, but:

the Athens High Bulldogs lost the championship to Columbus South,

the Buffalo Bills lost the Super Bowl to the New York Giants,
the Indianapolis Colts lost the opening game to the New England Patriots.

Do you suppose coming close - coming real close - was good enough for the fellows in the locker rooms after the game?

Is coming close good enough for you?

There was a time when coming close was close enough for me! But what did I know? I was a child back then.

Back when I was a child, my grandpa used to play horseshoes. My grandpa was really good at horseshoes. He had his own horseshoe pit out in his backyard.

You would think a talent like that would be something that would be inherited. After all, Archie Manning's sons all grew up to be great quarterbacks. My grandpa figured his grandson would be a great horseshoe pitcher, too. What do you think about that?

Grandpa was determined to teach me. He was going to teach me all his secrets. He was going to show me all his skills. Like Tiger Woods' father, grandpa dreamed of watching me win the horseshoe equivalent of the Master's Tournament.

So, back when I was just a little boy, grandpa took me out into his backyard to teach me horseshoes. Before I could touch the iron shoe, I had to watch grandpa's pitching style. I watched him pull his arm back and fling that horseshoe. I watched that horseshoe fly through the air. I listened to hear that ping as the shoe hit the iron.

Grandpa was real good. Time after time, grandpa always got a ringer. I was a good grandson. Time after time, I cheered when grandpa made that iron sing.

After several classes of watching grandpa, he finally handed the horseshoe to me and said, "It's your turn, Jerry. You do it."

So I did it. One throw went off to the left and hit the side of the shed. Another throw went off to the right and ended up in grandma's rhubarb patch. One time I almost forgot to let go. The horseshoe went way up high in the air, sailed over my head and landed ten feet behind me. Grandpa didn't seem to tire of ducking, so I kept throwing.

Finally, I got a throw that went straight. Finally, I threw one that landed near the iron. Finally, I threw one that landed very near the iron. It landed just a fraction of an inch away from the iron.

When that happened, grandpa cheered. He told me getting near was good.

I thought grandpa was right. I thought that coming close to something was always going to be good enough.

What did I know? I was just a little boy. It wasn't until a few months later that I learned the lesson: coming close isn't close enough.

That was when my dad decided to teach me how to bowl. He took me down to the Roller-Bowl. The Roller-Bowl was a wonderful place in my little home town. It was the center of winter activity. It was the place to be. It was where the action was. It was half bowling alley and half roller skating rink.

Dad took me into the bowling half of the Roller-Bowl. It was my first visit. When he opened the door, the masculine scent of sweat and cigarette smoke and beer wafted out. When I walked through the doors, I heard the crashing of the balls hitting the pins, the laughter of the patrons, the cheers of the crowds.

I knew it from the start - this was better than horseshoes!

Up at the counter, Dad paid for the games. He rented funny little shoes for me to wear. He took me over to a rack of balls where he found one with little holes to fit my little fingers.

He walked me around the horseshoe shaped ring of orange plastic seats and showed me the alley in all its oil polished beauty. He gave me a quick lesson about how to hold the ball, about how to swing my arm, about how to walk to the line. His lessons were much quicker than grandpa's. He sat down, pointed me toward the pins and said, "Knock 'em down!"

This was sure better than horseshoes.

I swaggered up to the alley with that heavy ball dangling from my little fingers. I swung my arm and arched that ball on its way. When it hit the lane, it bounced and wobbled its way back and forth across the alley. When it got almost to the pins, it veered off to the left and dropped into the gutter - just a fraction of an inch away from the pins.

I turned around with a big smile on my face. I said, "Wasn't that great, did you see how close I got?"

Bowling started out so good, but it took an ugly turn so soon. With my first throw of the ball, I learned one of life's cruelest lessons: coming close isn't good enough!

If you don't believe me, ask Richard Nixon about 1960. Ask Hubert Humphrey about 1968. Ask Al Gore about 2000. They'd all tell you the same thing. Coming close isn't close enough.

They found out through personal experience. They came as close as a man could get to being president without a victory party. They came as close as losers can get, but they didn't get to sleep in Lincoln's bed!

Take it closer to home. You apply for a job. Out of hundreds of applicants, you're chosen for an interview. Out of several, you're called back for a second interview. Out of everyone who wanted the job, it came down to you and someone else. "It was a tough decision," the boss said, "you were a real close number two." "It could have gone either way," he said. But you know what it means to end up number two in the interview process. You don't get the job.

After dating for years, you finally get engaged and plan a wedding. You rent a hall. You buy a dress. You're the center of attention at all those wedding showers. After all those years, you think you're all set. But the day before the big event, he turns tail and runs. You came real close to getting that M-R-S, but you're still a miss.

You study real hard to get an A on that test. You study harder than you've ever studied in your life. You know how important this one test is for your future. You know the information backwards and forwards. Even as you take the test, you feel good about it. As the teacher hands the graded tests back, you smile with anticipation. But when you look at the top of your test sheet, you see you didn't get the grade you wanted. You nearly made it, but you fell one point short of an A. You came close, but you had to settle for another B.

Real life is not like a game of horseshoes. In real life, coming close is just the consolation prize. In real life, coming close doesn't pay the bills. It doesn't put a wedding band on your finger. It doesn't win a scholarship.

Well, that's the way it is with Christianity, too. It's not good enough to come close to giving your life to Jesus Christ. It's not good enough to end up near the kingdom of God.

That's the message Jesus wanted the people in those towns and villages to hear. Sure, the kingdom is near. Sure, it's real close. Sure, Jesus is in the neighborhood. It won't do you any good to live next door, or to listen to the party through open windows. You've got to invite Jesus to come and live in your home.

Jesus didn't want the people in those towns to miss out on the kingdom. Have you ever felt like you're missing out on something good -
- that you don't have something you need,

- that you've missed the boat,
- that your life's just not right?

Have you ever had that feeling that you've just missed out on something really great? You know you came close, real close, but you just missed.

Maybe you've felt it at work -

- when your work just isn't as fulfilling as you had hoped,
- when you just miss being really good at your job,
- when you're skipped over for some promotion,
- when you don't hear words of appreciation and praise.

Maybe you've felt it at home -

- when the excitement in your marriage fizzles out,
- when you get nagged at too much and ignored too often,
- when your children don't behave,
- when your parents are too set in their ways,
- when your days and nights are filled with that boring sameness.

Maybe every innovation you try and every idea you throw out just misses the mark. You're real close to having it all, but there's some spark that's missing, some enthusiasm and vitality that are missing, some "joie d'vive" that's just not there.

Several years ago that great singer Peggy Lee had a hit song which asked the question, "Is that all there is?" Peggy Lee's soft and smoky voice sang as she wondered: is that all there is to life, to love, to romance, to friendship?

How's your life going right now? Is there something lacking, something missing, something incomplete?

When you take inventory and add up the love you've got, the contentment you've got, the friends you've got, the faith you've got - is the bottom line just not enough?

Are you still waiting around for the joy to begin?

Jesus brought the kingdom of God near. The disciples have told you that you're close. It's like you threw a horseshoe and it landed just a fraction of an inch away from the iron. You're just as close as you can be, but you didn't get a ringer.

Jesus wants you to know. Close isn't close enough.

Don't let it happen to you. Don't let your life end nearly knowing Christ. Don't settle for coming close to accepting what Jesus has to offer. Don't be satisfied with having a good life when Jesus wants you to enjoy an abundant life.

The message Jesus gave his disciples to tell the people was that the kingdom of God had come near. It was true for the people who saw the disciples come parading down the main street in their towns, and it's still true for you, today.

The kingdom of God is near. It's right there within your grasp. All you have to do is to reach out and take it.

As a Christian, you don't have to settle for coming close.

You can find completeness;

you don't have to be satisfied with just getting by.

You can be filled with joy;

you don't have to live in drudgery.

You can be victorious -

no matter what life throws in your path.

You can find riches -

not the empty hope of a quick financial windfall from the lottery or bingo,

not the promise of financial security,

not the seduction of a full bank account -

but true riches:

an appreciation of the beauty in this wonderful world,

an understanding that everything you see and touch is sacred,

a realization that kindness and love are the only things that make life worthwhile,

and a deepening friendship and trust with your sisters and brothers in Christ.

You can find happiness -

not the giddiness of a few and selected moments when you got what you thought you wanted,

not some strained smile you paste on your face for those times when you know you're supposed to be happy -

but true happiness:

knowing that you are forgiven and loved and accepted just the way you are, with all your deeply hidden secrets revealed;

seeing your future and the future of your loved ones held gently in God's everlasting arms;

feeling the warmth and welcome of people who want you and care for you.

You can find joy -
not the sarcastic laughter that comes from watching someone
else's failures,
not the snicker that comes when you see someone else make a
mistake or get hurt,
not some embarrassing home video of falling down or dropping
your pants;
but true joy:
the knowledge that your life and your future are set,
the self acceptance that you're loved and wanted,
the rewards of working hard to be a better person,
the assurance that you're following your savior's lead.

Coming close only works in horseshoes. Real life isn't good enough if
you just come close. Why settle for so little when you can have it all through
Jesus Christ?

Jesus came to give it all to you.

He's the spark that's missing in your life.

He's the excitement you've been looking for everywhere else.

He's the hope you thought you lost.

Get closer to Jesus.

He is that fraction of an inch that marks the difference between a
spare and a strike.

He is that infinitesimal bit of air that hangs between just coming
close and scoring a ringer.

Jesus is still sending out his disciples. He's sending them out into the
countryside. He's sending them to every village and town and city with the
very same message.

Your life will be made complete only when you pay heed to the message:
the kingdom of God has come near to you.

Isn't it time you rushed out to take it in?