

Eternity Isn't What You Think

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 0 0] I turned 50 earlier this month.

People have asked me how I feel. And my response has been consistently that the thing that has struck me the most, people think 40 is the big deal over the hump, halfway, whatever.

But when I got to 50, that was when I started to really realize that I have less time in front of me than behind me, most likely. And it's a sobering thought.

It's sobering to think about what is my life about. It makes me realize that when I was in my 20s and 30s, I thought I was a pretty eternally minded kind of guy.

But now that I'm 50, it's starting to sink in at a whole new level for me to think about what is my life here on earth about? And what will my eternity be like?

[1 : 2 2] For those of you who are younger, this day is coming. Some of you are already nodding your heads and saying, yes, we understand. So, but as we think about this question, as I've pondered this this week in my own life, I want to put the question for you, how much do you think about these questions?

About how your life today connects with your eternal state? This is, in fact, part of what our passage this morning addresses.

And this is why I raise the question, because Jesus has things to say to us. He has lots to say about eternity and about our lives now in light of it.

And so we're going to continue in our series in Luke. If you have a Bible, you can turn with me to Luke 16. I forgot my program.

Anyone want to give me a page number? 823 in your pew Bible, if you're using the pew Bibles. Luke 16, we're going to be starting in verse 19 for most of our, for our parable today.

[2 : 3 3] But I'm actually going to start in verse 14 as I read. And 822. Thank you. 822 is where it is. Part of what you see, if you remember, Greg last week talked on the parable of the dishonest manager and how to understand the shrewdness of taking our worldly beings, our worldly possessions, and investing them for eternal purposes and eternal values.

And then Jesus continues. And in 14 through 18, these are not passages, verses we're going to spend a lot of time on today. And I'll just note verse 18 is a whole sermon in and of itself.

But in terms of the flow of thought, let me just walk you through it. Verse 14, the Pharisees who were there heard Jesus talking about how to use their money for eternal purposes.

And they responded with ridicule. And Jesus confronts them and says, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

And then he turns this corner, which feels very abrupt to talk about the law and the prophets. But what he's really saying is, if you understood the law and the prophets, you would not be a lover of money rather than a lover of God.

[3 : 54] And in fact, you would say a hearty amen to what I just preached about, using your money for the poor, for those in need, for the sake of eternal values of building God's kingdom.

But because you don't understand the law, because you don't understand the prophets, because you have hardened your hearts against God, you instead respond to my parable and ridicule.

And then verse 18 is thrown in there as a, oh, and by the way, the law still stands. The law is still important because it points us to important things. Now, how verse 18 fits into there is a whole other sermon.

I'm just going to bracket it and say, come back another time, we'll deal with it. But not today. But it's in this context of Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees and this sort of head-to-head where Jesus is exposing their lack of heart submission to God's word that we come to the parable that we come to today.

And so I wanted to point that out, spend a few minutes walking through that so that we understand where this parable is going. Because this parable is an interesting one. It's one of the more challenging ones as we look at it.

[5 : 08] So, having said that, let's look together at God's word starting in, I'll read starting in verse 14 so you can get the flow of what I just described. And we'll read to the end of the chapter.

The Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all these things and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men. But God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone forces his way into it.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. And he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

And then he begins this parable. There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

[6 : 12] And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue. For I am in anguish in this flame.

But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things. But now he is comforted here and you are in anguish.

And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass from here to you may not do so and none may cross from there to us.

[7 : 18] And he 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.

And he said to them, and 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.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, we confess at times that we find it challenging to know what your word says.

But Lord, we pray this morning that we would have hearts that seek to submit to your word and minds that seek to understand your word and wills that seek to do your word.

[8 : 22] Lord, help us to know it rightly and to respond appropriately to it. Lord, we thank you. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. In this parable, Jesus tells us two things about eternity.

The first thing is that eternity may not be what we think. And the second thing is that the heart of eternity is in the heart. I'm not usually that poetic.

Come on, I need a little love here. So here we go. So, eternity may not be what you think. And the heart of eternity is in the heart. Let's look at those two points together.

The first thing is eternity may not be what you think. This is what we see in the first part of the parable from verses 19 through 26. And it starts right at the beginning. Jesus lays out a situation where there are two men, right?

And they could not be more polar opposite in their life circumstances. There's rich detail in this. The man is described as being clothed in purple, which was very rare, and therefore only the wealthy could wear it.

[9 : 37] And fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously, not just occasionally, but every day. He lived in the lap of luxury. And at his gate, there was the opposite man, the poor man named Lazarus.

Not only was he poor, but he was laid at his gate, which suggested that he was probably lame or crippled or ill in some way. And so he was in quite a dire situation.

And he was covered with sores, and he desired to be fed with the scraps that fell from the rich man's tables. And even the dogs came and licked his sores, which is not a nice sort of helpful healing thing.

This is a sign that he was so unable to defend himself. And in a Jewish context, this also meant that he was made richly unclean. And so he was in every way needy and impoverished.

And the rich man seemed to have everything that he wanted. And in the first century, many would have equated God's blessing with material wealth and prosperity.

[10 : 48] Many of us maybe still think that today in some ways. Jesus then goes on to say, but then eternity happened.

Verses 22, the poor man died, and he was carried by angels to Abram's side. The man who couldn't walk was carried to the gate of the rich man's house in need, was carried to a place of comfort.

In Abram's side is an imagery that pictures this place of welcome in God's people and in God's place, this comfort and provision of all that he needed.

And the rich man also died and was buried. And he went to Hades. Description of the place for the dead.

Their eternal destinies were flip-flopped from their earthly realities. And in fact, you see this, Abraham says this very clearly in verse 25, does he not?

[11 : 56] In your lifetime you got good, but then you ended up in not so good place. He had a hard road in this life and yet he ended up in heaven.

Now, we're going to unpack this a little bit more. This is not saying that the poor are inherently spiritually superior to others, nor does it mean that those who are rich are inherently superiorly inferior or acceptable or not acceptable.

That's not what the point of the parable is. But what I want to take from you is in the first century, this would have been a surprise, this reversal. The question I want to ask you is, who do you think gets into heaven today?

Interesting. Lifeway Research did some interesting research and said that 60% of Americans think that people are pretty much good. And while every culture will have its own subset of what they think is good or good enough, I think the prevailing view in our world today, and maybe even in our own hearts, is that good people probably don't deserve hell.

Hell is for really bad people. People who do... Now, and you can define really bad things. You know, you can define really bad as not recycling. You know, we can...

[13 : 28] We'll all have different standards of what we think is really bad and not bad. But I think most of us, if you really push us, do we really think that good people should get into heaven?

And there's a church version of good people too, isn't there? I come to church. I give my money to the church. I find a place to serve.

I'm a good community participant. Isn't that enough? I was... Some of you have heard me talk about this before, but back in the 1990s, there was a very momentous week in my life because my grandfather passed away the same week that Ted Bundy did.

Some of you may be too young to remember who Ted Bundy was, but he was a serial killer who was really atrocious. He was a truly... The things he did were truly evil.

And yet, rumor has it that Ted Bundy, on death row, before his execution, repented of his sin and trusted in Jesus for his salvation.

[14 : 46] My grandfather was a great philanthropist. The library in Weston, Massachusetts has a plaque on the wall because he gave most of the money for it to be built.

He was an upstanding citizen in every way. He would have been seen as a good man in the community in every way. But he had no concern for God in his life.

And he had no faith in Christ. The gospel tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And that the basis upon which we get into heaven is not our goodness or our badness.

But it is, in fact, our abandonment of all of our attempts to save ourselves or to prove ourselves good enough to God on our own and to trust wholly in Jesus.

So the first thing this parable points us to is a surprising sense of who gets into heaven. The second thing this parable points us to is that the weight of eternity is greater than we assume.

[16 : 00] The picture of comfort at Abraham's bosom is a beautiful one. It is saying heaven is going to be the fulfillment of all of your hopes. Right? This man in his life longed for comfort, for food, for provision, for relief from his sufferings.

And when he was carried by the angels up to the bosom of Abraham, to the side of Abraham, he was, in fact, welcomed and embraced and all of the things he longed for were his.

And so the comfort was wonderful. And yet, the contrast again is strong here. The torment was great.

If you look at verse 25, you see this. Well, and even verse 24, the man cries out and asks for help from Father Abraham, please come and cool my tongue for I am in anguish in this flame.

The Bible depicts hell as a terrible place to be. It is a place of torment and anguish. Now, let's just stop and think about this for a while because we don't talk about this very much, do we?

[17 : 18] We don't talk about it's a pretty distasteful thought for us today in our culture. you are thought a cruel and unkind person to think that someone might go to hell unless you're really angry at them and then you just, it just comes out and then you wish you hadn't said it because you really don't want it.

But, here's the reality. We are uncomfortable in our culture today in a tolerant culture, in a tolerance of trying to seek understanding, we're uncomfortable with hell.

And yet, we know that the Bible talks about it a lot. let me just give a couple of thoughts on this. First of all, one of the ways that has been most helpful for me to think about hell is that there are some people that I truly do think deserve judgment.

Okay? This weekend, we had in our world yet another terrible attack where someone out of hatred of another who was different from them took a gun and shot and killed over 50, maybe more people.

You want justice to happen. You want that person to be judged. You want there to be a response to evil. people. And that's what I want too, I think.

[18 : 41] That's what we all want. And we can recognize that there are people, there are sex traffickers and there are war mongers and there are, you know, we can go on.

There are some people who deserve to be judged. The problem is not that we don't like judgment. Ultimately, that's just untrue. The problem is that we want to be on the right side. And we want to be far enough away from the wrong side that we need to give a lot of other people a lot of credit and say, well, you know, they don't deserve to be judged either because that's too close to me and I don't want to be on the wrong side of that.

But I want to tap into our fundamental human desire that in fact we do want evil to be judged. The question is not whether we would want that, but the question is where do we stand in relationship to it?

Maybe another way to say it is that a God without judgment is a God who would ignore evil. This is not good. Second thing about hell that I want to say is that there are pictures here, right?

Flames, fire. What is that all about? There's been lots of conversation about how literal or not literal this picture is.

[20 : 05] I think that Jesus is tapping into a first century view that these two pictures would be that there was some sense of an intermediate place on your way to your eternal destinies, that Jesus is using what would be a culturally understood form.

although even in the cultural understanding of the day, that did not mean that there was a chance for switching over. But he's using this imagery, and with that imagery then, he uses this imagery of flames and fire.

And we think, really? It's just kind of incredulous. And some of us, out of desire to say, no, the Bible's literal, this is what it says, says, well, no, there have to be real flames. Tim Keller says this in response to that, to say that the scriptural image of hellfire is not wholly literal should be of no comfort whatsoever.

The reality will be far worse than the image. What then are the, quote, fire and, quote, darkness symbols for? They are vivid ways to describe what happens when we lose the presence of God.

Darkness refers to the isolation and fire to the disintegration of being separated from God. Away from the favor and face of God, we literally, horrifically, and endlessly fall apart.

[21 : 37] When God brings his judgment on us, when he casts us away from him in his righteous wrath, we are separate from him.

in such a profound way. And it is terrible. And it is horrible. And at times in the past, the church may have over-literalized and used this as a cheap threat.

But in fact, that cheap threat was pointing to a much more profound reality and a much more profound warning. thing. This man, the rich man, ended up in hell, not because he was rich completely, but because in his riches he refused the word of God.

He ignored the poor man at his gate. He did nothing to share from what he had to bless the person who was in need right before him.

not only that, but you begin to see in his response to his situation in heaven or in hell. Isn't it interesting? He doesn't say, please, Father Abraham, get me out of here.

[22 : 56] I know I've sinned. I know I deserve this, but have mercy on me. Instead he says, have mercy on me. Can you give me a little comfort? He doesn't even then own, that he maybe deserved to be there.

And so, eternity tells us that the people that we see get into heaven or hell may be surprising.

The second thing is that the weight of it is serious. And the third thing is that eternity is just that. It is eternal. I want to just sit there for a minute and think about what does that mean?

Because I think that part of what you see very clearly here is particularly in verse 26. Abraham says, this is a chasm that cannot be crossed. Though there was in the story, in the metaphorical story, you could view a cross and communicate a cross.

cross. In the end of the day, what happens in eternity is fixed. This is what the Hebrews passage ended with that we read earlier this morning.

[24 : 13] That as human beings, we are to live one life and then to die once and then to face judgment. And what happens when that happens, at the end of our human lives here, that judgment is an eternal one.

There is no going back. There are no second chances. There are no ways to say, well, I didn't mean it. Can I get a do-over? And that's a very sobering thought.

It also is a very dignifying thought. It means that our life now matters. God gives us this life to respond to Him as He would have us.

He gives us this life to respond to His word with faith and trust and belief. He gives us this life to turn from sin and from a life apart from Him.

and a holy trust in Jesus' name. This would have been a great sermon if I could just end it right now.

[25 : 39] And the parable feels like it's done. Okay, now we know what Jesus wants to tell us and He's warning people. But the interesting thing is this parable goes on.

It doesn't just tell us about eternity in these ways. But the parable goes on to talk about how then do we think about who is it that does get into heaven?

How is it that we think about how do we respond to this? I think at the core of it what Jesus is saying is this, that the heart of eternity is in the heart.

Part of the reason that I say that is the context going back to verse 15 when it says God knows your heart. Because it sure seems like this whole parable is a warning to the Pharisees, doesn't it?

you go back to the rich man and you think about it as we've already talked about. He has not treated Lazarus well in life. He did not respond to the need of this man before him.

[26 : 47] The man whose very name says God helps him. Instead he's ignored him. He's ignored God and ignored God's word and ignored the need in front of him.

This has been a broader theme that we've seen throughout the book of Luke, isn't it? That the material possessions and the things we do with our money and our stuff and our time and our love, that these make a difference because they're the expressions of the kingdom of God and if we claim to be followers of Jesus, these things ought to be true of us as a result of our salvation, as an outworking of it.

This man didn't exhibit those characteristics on earth. And when he then gets to hell, part of his attitude seems to be, I don't deserve this.

I deserve relief from this. Please, Abraham, give me relief. Maybe Lazarus, your servant boy, can come and help me. recognize that the rich man here has not suddenly become a sympathetic figure.

He continues in his arrogance. Lazarus should come and serve me in my torment. And then this whole thing with the brothers, what is Jesus pointing to when he says that?

[28 : 14] I think what he's saying is, look, Jesus, I don't think that this is my fault because I don't think I truly understand. No one came to me from the dead and said, look, it's really bad.

Don't do this. Change now. It wasn't my fault. I didn't know enough. But maybe my brothers would respond differently, so go tell them. His heart is not even in hell and in torment, responding with a brokenness or a recognition that, in fact, he did deserve it.

And Abraham rebukes him and reveals this to him. He says, no. No. They have Moses and the prophets just like you did, and they're not living any differently than you are.

Don't think they're going to change. Even if someone from the dead comes and speaks to them, because the heart of eternity has to do with your heart response.

And if your heart isn't willing to believe the things you do know, you're not going to respond to something new and different.

[29 : 31] Recognize that what Jesus is doing is, in this, he is very poetically but very directly confronting the Pharisees. He is saying, you know the law and the prophets.

You know that they called on God's people to not be lovers of money but to love mercy and justice and the poor and the needy.

you know that God's word called Israel to be a light to the nations and you have made it a sectarian, selfish empire.

And most importantly, having been rich and ignoring the poor, you also have ignored God's word which is now living right in front of you.

As the Bible says, God spoke in various ways through the prophets and through Moses but in his last day he spoke through Jesus Christ himself. And Jesus is confronting the Pharisees and saying to them, will you respond to me now?

[30 : 45] And here's the irony of it, right? In the parable, Lazarus' brothers, or the rich man's brothers don't get any second chance, right? But the whole point of the parable is for Jesus talking to the crowd in front of him to say, you now do have that chance.

You can now respond right now differently than what you are. Rather than ridiculing and hardening your hearts, you can respond to this word right now.

And Luke's audience, reading this after the resurrection, must just chuckle at the irony.

Because one did come back from the dead, didn't he? And even then, not all believe. Not all responded to the resurrected word of God.

And so, this message, this parable is a warning. It is a warning to us that our hearts need to respond to God and to His word.

[32 : 09] If you're here this morning and you haven't responded to God in faith, forsaking your own means of trying to get into heaven or God's good graces by your own effort, God is calling you to forsake those and to trust in Him today, holy and only in what Jesus has done for you.

And if you're here like the Pharisee, believing that your church involvement and your good works and your participation in our community is enough without a real heart submission to and response to Jesus, this parable warns us, warns you.

Do you receive and follow the word of God? Do you believe in and follow Jesus? Do you follow Him in a way where all of your life, including your money and your resources, are at His disposal for His glory and for His kingdom?

Now I've said that the heart of eternity is in our hearts and what we've seen here is that this parable has actually focused in. If you notice, Lazarus disappears halfway through the parable, right?

It's really about the rich man and what we've seen is the picture of his hardened heart and his unwillingness to receive God's mercy.

[33 : 45] And we need to hear that warning. But the reality is that our hearts can only respond to God when we see His heart for us.

You see, we zoom back from this particular parable to the whole section. And if you remember when Greg introduced this section to us way back when, he said, this whole section in Luke 9 to 19 is Jesus turning from His ministry up north in Galilee and He is turning and heading towards Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. He has set His face towards Jerusalem which means that He has set His face towards the cross and His crucifixion and His death on behalf of sinners.

And when we look at the cross, we see God's heart most clearly. We see that God cares enough about good and evil that He will not let evil go unpunished.

That He will not simply wave a hand and say, it's okay. But God will say, evil must be punished. But then He says, but I will in My mercy and grace provide a way for sinners like you and me to not be under that judgment for the evil of our own sin.

[35 : 11] He says, evil will be punished and that's how much I care about righteousness. righteousness. But He cares enough to send Jesus to take that for us.

To take that judgment in our place. And Jesus does this with the initiative where He comes to us just as Jesus is coming to the Pharisees to say, turn now while you can.

Change your mind now while you're still able. Respond while you are still in this life before eternity is fixed and unchangeable. This is the heart of God that He has come to rescue sinners like you and me.

And He calls us to respond. He calls us to respond in faith and trust in Jesus. He calls us to respond to His Word in a life that is surrendered to Him and to His kingdom.

He calls us to respond and to live the way God has called us to as His children. And this is why it is so important for us to celebrate communion this morning.

[36 : 35] As we continue with our service we're going to transition to communion. The Lord's Supper prayer. This is what Jesus instituted before His death for His disciples.

And in it He is reminding us of His heart. In the bread and in the cup we are reminded that His body and His blood were broken and shed to experience the judgment of God upon sin.

Upon our sin. God. He did this in love and in mercy so that we who don't deserve to know God or be accepted by Him might be able to enter in by grace into a relationship with God where we would sit at the bosom of Abraham, the side of Abraham, and know His comfort and His peace and an eternity of relating to God rightly where His glory envelops us and captures us.

This is what communion celebrates. It should be for us both sobering as we remember the warnings but also encouraging and strengthening as we remember God's heart for us.

What I'd like to do is to pray for just a minute and then if those who are serving can come forward as I come down. I want to just give us a moment to just have quiet before we begin to observe communion together.

[38 : 26] So let's pray together. Holy Spirit, I ask for you to come now. Lord, and show us our hearts.

Reveal to us if there is hardness, wickedness. Lord, where we are treasuring independence or selfishness, where we are treasuring anger and hatred.

we are treasuring pleasure in this world more than you. Lord, show us if there is an unbelieving or hardened heart in us.

Lord, we pray to you that you would show us your heart for us. Your grace and your mercy shown to us in Christ. Lord, that we would respond to you, Lord, in faith, in abandon, in hope.

Lord, we pray that you would, by your spirit, do this in our hearts in the next few minutes as we observe the Lord's Supper together. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[39 : 52] Amen. Amen. Amen.