

“RIGHT NOW COUNTS FOREVER”

I. Introduction

- A. If you look in your bulletin, you will see that I have given this sermon the title, “Right Now Counts Forever.”
1. Some of you may recognize this as the name of the monthly column that the late R.C. Sproul wrote for the devotional magazine *Tabletalk*.
 2. In the very first issue of *Tabletalk* in 1977, Sproul explained his intention for this column by saying that it “is designed to focus attention on the relevancy of our present lives to the eternal destinies we all face.”
 3. As I studied this text in Luke this week, it struck me that “Right Now Counts Forever” is a good summary of what this passage is about.
 4. As one commentator puts it, this parable was given by our Lord “to emphasize vividly the tremendous seriousness of life on this side of the grave — on the choice made here by us depends our eternal weal or woe.” [Geldenhuys, 427]
- B. It is important to remember that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus comes in a context in which Jesus is continuing to confront the Pharisees for their attachment to riches and for their disdain toward the sinners whom Jesus was welcoming and calling to repentance.
1. This tells us that the rich man in this parable represents the Pharisees and those who shared their perspective, while Lazarus represents those to whom the Pharisees refused to show mercy.
 2. As we study this parable today, we will consider the important lessons that it teaches us about the connection between the life we

live now and the life that awaits us in eternity.

II. The Problem with Living for Self-Indulgence

- A. Our text begins with Jesus describing the lifestyle of this rich man.
1. The first part of the description focuses on his attire.
 2. He was clothed in purple and fine linen.
 3. This might not seem very significant to us today, but it conveyed a distinct meaning to people in Jesus's day.
 4. Purple was a very costly dye that was derived from snails.
 5. And fine linen was the material that was used to make the most expensive undergarments.
 6. Only an extremely wealthy person could afford to wear such clothes.
 7. On top of that, this man feasted sumptuously every day.
 8. In other words, every meal that he ate was a gourmet indulgence.
 9. This man had it all.
 10. If that old television show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" had been around back in the first century, this man would have been an ideal subject for one of the episodes.
- B. Now, the point that Jesus is making here is not that it is wrong for people to enjoy nice clothing or good food.
1. The problem is that this man's sole purpose in life was to cater to his appetites and desires, a perspective that a person can have even when he does not have a lot of money.

2. Because this rich man was entirely self-focused, he showed absolutely no regard to a clear need that was right before his eyes.
 3. Jesus says that there was a poor man named Lazarus who was laid at the rich man's gate, presumably each day.
 4. The use of the passive tense verb "was laid" suggests that he was crippled, and the text tells us that his body was covered with sores.
 5. He was so hungry that he would have been happy to receive the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, but nothing was given to him.
 6. The only attention he got came from the wild dogs who licked his sores, causing infection and rendering him ceremonially unclean.
- C. Jesus's description of these two men certainly sets them in sharp contrast to each other.
1. The rich man lived in luxury, while Lazarus lived in misery.
 2. Nevertheless, there is one detail that hints at the fact that their situations will be reversed after they die.
 3. The rich man may seem to have it all, but there is one thing that he does not have.
 4. He does not have a name, at least not in this parable.
 5. Lazarus may seem like a nobody, but the fact that he is given a name reveals that he is really a somebody.
 6. He matters.
 7. Moreover, the name that he is given is a contraction of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means 'God helps.'

8. Though appearances suggest otherwise, he is the one who has God as his helper.
- D. Jesus says that when Lazarus died, he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom.
1. The reason why Abraham is the figure welcoming him to heaven is because Abraham is the patriarch of Israel, the father of all who believe.
 2. As Paul says in Galatians 3, "it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham."
 3. Now it is true that Jesus makes no mention Lazarus's faith, but the teaching of the rest of Scripture requires that we infer that he did have saving faith.
 4. He would not have been carried to Abraham's side if he did not share Abraham's faith.
 5. He did not go to heaven because he was poor.
 6. He went to heaven because he trusted God to be faithful to his promise to provide all that is necessary for his salvation.
 7. Furthermore, even in his low estate, he did not grow embittered and curse God.
 8. He did not allow his suffering to drive him away from God.
 9. On the contrary, he responded to his afflictions by continuing to look to God for deliverance and help.
 10. We need to do the same thing in the face of the trials that the Lord ordains for us in this life.
 11. We must not lose heart.

12. We need to persevere in the belief that “this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:17-18)
- E. The rich man in Jesus’s parable looked for his happiness in the things that are seen.
1. And because the things that are seen are transient, he was left with nothing when he died.
 2. His wealth could not protect him from the inevitability of death, and it did not do him any good when he was suffering the torments of hell.
 3. He stands as a sobering reminder that a person’s worldly condition cannot be looked upon as an indicator of his state in the sight of God.
 4. Of course, this parable is not saying that wealth disqualifies a person from heaven.
 5. The rich man’s sin was not being rich.
 6. His sin was that he lived a totally self-indulgent and self-absorbed life while turning a blind eye to a fellow Israelite who was in desperate need.
 7. If you live for the things of this world, you will have your heaven in this world, not in eternity.
 8. But if you use the things of this world with gratitude to God and in service to God and others, you show that your true citizenship is in heaven.

III. The Inseparable Gulf between Heaven and Hell

- A. This parable also provides us with some insight into what happens after we die.
1. Now, we have to remember that this is a parable, which means we should not think that all of its details are intended to be taken literally.
 2. For example, we should not draw the conclusion that people in hell will be able to see the people who are in heaven or have conversations with them.
 3. The basic lesson that this parable teaches us is that death is not the end.
 4. Both the rich man and Lazarus have a continued, conscious existence after they die, though their experiences stand in sharp contrast to each other.
- B. Lazarus's experience is reflective of what happens to the souls of believers when we die.
1. Though our bodies will rest in our graves until the day of resurrection, our souls will be immediately made perfect and received into fellowship with God in heaven.
 2. This picture of Lazarus being carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom assures us that believers are the objects of God's special care at the moment of our death.
 3. What a wonderful image this is for us to ponder.
 4. As for the rich man, his experience tells us what happens to the souls of the wicked when they die.
 5. And remember, according to the Bible, all who have not been cleansed by faith in Christ's blood are wicked in God's sight.
 6. Though the wicked will only experience the full torments of hell when they are bodily raised to everlasting shame and contempt on

judgment day, their souls are cast into eternal torment at the hour of their death.

7. This is what is meant by the name 'Hades' in this context.
 8. Hades is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term 'Sheol.'
 9. Both can refer either to the state of death in general or to the place of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked.
 10. The context tells us that the latter is in view in this parable.
- C. As the rich man experiences the anguish of hell, he longs for even some small degree of relief.
1. So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool his tongue with it.
 2. Notice the parallel between this and Lazarus's longing for the meager scraps of food that fell from the rich man's table.
 3. But just as Lazarus received nothing from the rich man while he was in this life, the rich man will not receive anything from Lazarus in the life to come.
 4. As Abraham explains to the rich man, there is a great chasm separating heaven and hell, so that there is no possibility of relief for those who are in hell.
 5. Those condemned to hell will be entirely cut off from all comfort.
 6. After death the day of grace has passed away and a person's eternal destiny is permanently fixed.
 7. There is no possibility of repentance for souls suffering in hell.

IV. The Hardness of the Unbelieving Heart

- A. When the rich man learns that there is no possibility of relief for him, his thoughts finally turn to others.
1. Though his fate is sealed, perhaps there is still hope for his brothers, who apparently lived the same kind of life that he had lived.
 2. So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers and warn them of their need to repent before it is too late.
 3. He thought that some sign from the afterlife would get his brothers' attention, similar to the way the ghost of Jacob Marley got Scrooge's attention or the way the ghost of Hamlet's father got Hamlet's attention in those stories.
 4. The rich man thought that if something truly extraordinary happened, it would convince his brothers of their danger and bring them to the point of repentance.
- B. Abraham responds to this request by saying, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."
1. And when the rich man protested that that was not good enough, Abraham replied, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."
 2. The phrase "Moses and the Prophets" simply means the Hebrew Bible, or what we refer to as the Old Testament.
 3. That was all of the Bible that there was at that point in history.
 4. Yet even then, God's Word was sufficient for salvation.
 5. This is what Abraham means when he says that if the rich man's brothers will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, then nothing will convince them to repent.

6. The Scriptures tell us about many people who witnessed God's great signs and mighty acts but did not respond with faith and repentance.
 7. When God performed great miracles at the time of the exodus, Pharaoh persisted in his unbelief and hardened his heart.
 8. When God sent fire from heaven during Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal, Jezebel swore that she would put Elijah to death.
 9. When Jesus raised a real man named Lazarus from the dead, the Jews had Jesus crucified.
 10. And when Jesus himself was raised in glory, most of the Jews refused to believe in him.
- C. The reason for unbelief is not a lack of evidence or a failure to use the right technique.
1. The reason why people continue in their unbelief is because of the hardness of their hearts.
 2. Were it not for the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those whom God graciously chooses to save, none of us would ever respond to the gospel in faith.
 3. This is why the church should never think that the key to making its mission fruitful is to come up with new, culturally relevant, attention-getting techniques.
 4. We believe that God's Word is sufficient to save.
 5. Therefore, by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.
 6. And as the apostle Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 4, we know that even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing, whose minds have been blinded by the god of this

world.

V. Conclusion

- A. This passage reminds us of what is at stake in this life.
- B. Don't waste your life by spending it in the pursuit of self-absorbed pleasure and amusement.
- C. Don't live as if there is no eternity, as if the most important thing is having your best life now.
- D. There is an eternity, and you are getting closer to it each and every day of your life.
- E. So prepare for your eventual departure from this world by trusting in Jesus Christ and by living not for yourself, but for the one who loved you and gave himself for you.