

I. Intro

A. Just over 40 years ago, I found myself in the lead of a big race in Columbus, IN.

1. It was a biathlon – a 20-mile bike race coupled with a 3-mile run, and it was being done back when it was considered unthinkable that one person would do both. I was there with 9 fraternity brothers. Together we made up five two-man teams. I was the slowest of the runners and I was paired with Phil, who was the slowest of the bikers. So, I was never supposed to be in the lead. But, for some quirky reasons, Phil won the bike race giving me a big lead – which was very exciting for the thirty seconds I raced down the football field in front of a few thousand people. I felt very cool. I was pretty sure I was going to make the next issue of Sport's Illustrated. But then everything fell apart when I realized that I had no idea where I was supposed to go. The course was not well marked and because I'd never been in first place in a race before – and all I'd ever bothered to do was follow the person in front of me – I had not bothered to listen when they described the course. And so I had to stop and wait for the other runners to catch me so I knew where to go.

B. I share that because I'm not the only not thinking ahead. Some of you are making the same mistake – only not in a silly race in Columbus, IN. You are making it in life itself.

1. You are also not thinking ahead. Not much anyway. You may have plans for today and tomorrow. Even next week, next month and next year. Some of you may even have given a lot of thought to your retirement. You have a 401k plan and a will. But you are not thinking much about eternity. And you should be. Because, well, Jesus says a lot about eternity. And eternity changes everything.

2. Jesus not only famously rose from the dead with a new body. He told his followers they would do the same.

a) He spoke about eternal life and promised we would get to live in a world that worked – one free of the pain, confusion and injustice of this one.

b) In John 14 he told them he was going ahead to prepare a place for those who would follow him and promised to return to take us there.

c) His revelation to John – the last book in the New Testament - includes some hints about what this will be like. It's quite symbolic – we hear things about streets paved with gold that is clear as glass, and thick walls, and perfect cubes and gates made out of jewels. It takes work to understand what we are being told.

d) In I Cor. 15 Paul talks about Christ's resurrection body as the prototype – the first fruits – of what is to come.

3. I could go on – and will later in this series. The New Testament has much to say about living after we die. And what it has to say changes everything.

4. And so we need to drill down on this.

- a) Most people say they believe in life after death – which shouldn't surprise us. We are told in Ecc. 3 that God has written eternity in our hearts.
 - b) But spend more time and emotional energy planning a two-week vacation than they do thinking about eternity.
5. And that is a problem, not only because we are supposed to be shaped by eternity, but the promises of God about eternity fuel great hope and inspire the kind of sacrificial live that we are called to live.
- C. This morning, we begin a six-week series called *Afterlife*, which takes an unblinking look at eternity, death, judgement, rewards, heaven and hell
- 1. It is framed by the idea that history is going somewhere – that it's not circular or aimless. It is marching towards a climactic event.
 - 2. It is framed by the idea that we are going somewhere. As Hebrews 9:27 claims, "it is appointed for us to live, die and then face judgement.
 - 3. It is framed by the promise that if you are in Christ – if you are his follower, his child, his disciple. If you have Jesus in your heart – we live after we die in with God. And it is beyond our imagination.
 - a) To cite CS Lewis is *The Last Battle* – which is the last book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. As the group dies and moves into the next land. He writes, "All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."
 - 4. This series is framed by the idea that in addition to their being a heaven – a place where God is – there is also a hell – a place marked by his absence. A place that is unthinkable horrible.
 - 5. And this series is framed by the idea that we are accountable for our life – everything we think, do and say – that we will meet God and be judged.
- D. None of these ideas is new or novel. But they occupy far too little of our thinking.
- E. I hope you will make this series a priority – show up each weekend and then process all of this with your small group – because:
- 1. you need to know what the Bible says about these things. There is a lot of misguided thinking out there about eternity. People believe a lot of crazy nonsense about what happens when we die. We need to hear the truth and be shaped by it.
 - 2. I hope you'll make this series a priority because - even though there are some heavy truths in this series – a right understanding of God's promises are life-giving. They bring hope and joy and peace. In very important ways, they make it clear that while elections might matter, they do not matter nearly as much as everyone says.
 - 3. I hope you will show up for this series because eternity changes everything.

4. And I hope that you will make this a priority because life is short. Eternity is not. And the opportunity to make a difference is now. We need to be asking ourselves, “What am I doing with my life – my one and only short life – that will matter in light of forever. When I meet God, what am I going to wish I had done? Way too many people are living like Esau – Jacob’s foolish twin brother who traded his birth rite for a bowl of soup, because he did not think ahead. Who are making decisions in light of the moment, not looking beyond the grave.

5. I hope you will make this series a priority because you live in a “pay me now” culture, where few are living today in light of eternity. We live in a country where we take on one trillion dollars in new national debt every 100 days because we want what we want when we want it – we are not thinking ahead. You are living at a moment when – if given a choice between heaven and hell, people want heaven. But if given a choice between heaven and this life, most dismiss what the Bible says. Few can relate to Paul – who we believe visited heaven (2 Cor. 12) - says, “to live is Christ and to die is gain. I’d rather leave now.”

6. Please understand – per the Bible - when we die we do not leave the land of the living to go to the land of the dying. We leave the land of the dying – these are the shadowlands – to go to be with God in the land of the living.

II. My big point today is that Christianity only makes sense if we think long term – so we need to think long term. Turn with me to Luke 6, we are going to begin with verse 20

A. Christ’s life and teaching are contained in the first four books of the New Testament – which we call The Gospels. They offer parallel accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry, and teaching from slightly different perspectives. There is a lot of overlap.

B. Both Matthew and Luke contain Jesus’ most famous sermon, which is generally called, the Sermon on the Mount.

1. It’s not long. When I have led pilgrimages to Israel, we go to the hill where Jesus likely delivered this sermon (at least one of the times. I believe he gave it many times. I think this was a standard stump speech). But we go there and I read it to people, using Matthew’s account. And it doesn’t take long (15 minutes)

C. We are looking at Luke’s account today. It’s slightly different.

1. In Luke’s telling, Jesus has just spent the night in prayer before choosing the twelve.

2. He then sits them down for – what in effect is the first day of class. This is 101 stuff. Basic, foundational, you have to learn this if you want to understand what comes next. And then he says – verse 17

D. Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

1. Jesus was a rabbi. Like other rabbi's he had disciples, and he traveled around teaching. What made him different was that He was God. Consequently, he taught with power and authority and he healed people and his crowds were big.

E. 20: Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

III. So, let's just pause to note:

A. These words are jarring and radical. Blessed are the poor? Really? Blessed are those who hunger and thirst. Are you serious? Karl Marx didn't say anything this countercultural.

B. These words are confusing. Blessed are the poor? I mean, this man's followers will respond by working hard to alleviate poverty – to feed the hungry, to care for the sick, to fight for the widow and orphan. The action of Christ's followers make it clear that there's nothing intrinsically good about poverty, hunger, sickness, social rejection.

C. These words are not very motivational – I mean, imagine I am recruiting you. We move to California and I start my own religion and I say, “If you follow me I can promise you poverty, hunger, thirst. You will cry a lot and most people will despise you.” Interested in signing up? Of course not. Does my recruiting appeal get any better if I say, “but it will all be worth it, because then you'll die and it will all be over.” No. If we stop there, what Jesus says – what he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount – does not hold together. But if all changes if we keep reading. He goes on:

1. **Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.** And then here is the money verse. Here is the key. Verse 23: **Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.**

D. The goal isn't to suffer. The call – the invitation - is to live today in light of eternity. It is to store up treasure in heaven. It is to serve now on the advance party.

E. Don't miss this. We're looking at the most important speech given by the most important person ever to live in the world. And he is calling us to shine our headlights beyond the grave. To live this life in light of an eternal kingdom.

IV. So, what do we need to do.

- A. First – we need to get on board with what Jesus is saying. We need his perspective.
1. Years ago, Max Dupree said, “the first job of a leader is to define reality.” We need to understand that definition. We need to study his teachings - his sermons, parables and other lessons - and look at his life and example – in order to see what he sees. There is a fair bit there about what comes next. Not as much as we like, but it holds it all together.
 2. Some people do not want to acknowledge what Jesus taught about heaven and hell. Some people do not want to acknowledge much of what Jesus taught about a lot of things. They want to pick and choose from among his ethical statements.
 3. I do not think that dog hunts. If Jesus is God, then we should pay attention to all of what he taught. If he’s not God, then he is a liar, and we shouldn’t be getting our ethics from him.
 4. I will agree with those who wish he had said more about what comes next, but let’s not overlook what he does say – such as his admonition to live today in light of eternity. To store up our treasure in heaven.
 - a) If what we see is all there is. Then eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.
 - b) But if He is who He says He is. And if we are more than hairless apes. If we are going to live forever. Then we need to start shining our headlights beyond the grave.
- B. Second – the first thing we need to do is understand what Jesus taught. The second thing we need to do is to embrace it. To adapt to it. To adjust our worldview and our lives to reflect this understanding.
1. This takes work. We are living in a confusing age. Our epistemological foundations are shifting. We are downstream from a lot of rapid change in technology. There are lots of competing religious claims and ideologies floating around.
 2. On top of that, this is a very secular moment.
 - a) We are living in what Richard John Newhaus described as a naked public square. (This claim that there should be no overarching truth).
 - b) We now have what Charles Taylor described as an immanent frame – we are surrounded by people who – even if they claim to believe in God - assume naturalistic causes for everything. There is no transcendent or divine.
 3. My point is, we need to understand that we are swimming in a very secular worldview, but we are to be more shaped by the Sermon on the Mount. We need to be shaped by God, his promises and the fact that we are living today in light of eternity.
- C. Third, we need to be busy serving as a member of the advance party.

1. The Kingdom of Jesus has landed an advance party. Like the Allied forces in the Pacific Theater in World War II, it's landed and taken the beach and that means it will prevail. The enemy still occupies much of the island, but it has no reinforcements. It will lose. God will return to claim it all. We are living in the now and not yet. Between his first advent and his second.
2. The point is, now is not a time to relax or check out. Looking ahead to heaven does not mean we do not care about what happens in this world.
 - a) I can see the emails already. “With everything going on in the world right now – the powder keg of the Middle East, the threat of China, Russia’s aggression, a consequential election on the horizon – why on earth are we going to spend our time talking about the afterlife? This is escapism pure and simple! Christians are too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.”
 - b) No. No. No. Everything about that is wrong.
 - (1) I wish Christians were heavenly minded. They are not.
 - (2) But secondly, the mindset we are called to - the life we are commissioned for, in which we are citizens of two cities (an earthly one and a heavenly one) is not one in which we sit back.
 - (3) CS Lewis was spot on when he wrote, “a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but on the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.
3. On the one hand, to borrow a line from WFB when he ran for Mayor of NY (as a joke. He said that the first thing he’d do if he won was demand a recount) – but his campaign buttons were “Don’t immanentize the eschaton.” Don’t think we can bring heaven to earth.

- V. So, how do we reflect on eternity
- A. I'm arguing that we need to be pulled forward by its gravitas. How do we do that?
- B. Honestly, I find it hard to do. I've read philosophers and physicists and others who write about it. And it doesn't make much sense to me.
- C. I have found some help from an illustration I was told years ago. It asks us to imagine a mountain – that is 100 miles high and a hundred miles high (and for reference, here is Bellingham, where we lived for 14 years. It's taken from Bellingham Bay, where I used to sail. And which is dwarfed by Mount Baker, which is 2 miles high. We are being asked to imagine a mountain 100 miles high.”
1. When this mountain – which is 50 x higher than Baker – is whittled down to nothing by a bird that comes by once every thousand years to sharpen its beak. When it is down to nothing, then one day in heaven will have passed.
 2. Of course – that isn't even true. I remind you of the stanza for one of the verses of Amazing Grace. When we've been there 10,000 years, Bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise then when we first begun.
- D. Men and women, you are going to live forever. Given that, what do you want to do with your one and only short life, that will matter for forever. Because:
1. Life is short. Eternity is not. And opportunity is now.
- E. Let me circle us back and remind you of the race I did not win. I was not prepared to win. I had not thought ahead. We are told to think ahead. Jesus tells us to think ahead.
- F. Next week we take a look at death – which is both an enemy and gateway. It is in your best interest to think rightly about it.
- G. I hope you will be back.
- VI. Lets pray