

BARNES, TOWERS, MARDI GRAS & YOU

We live in a time that death is on people's minds more than usual. Within the past month, tornadoes have ravaged communities destroying, injuring and killing. The world is paralyzed by the corona virus and the risks of death that it brings. So, this morning, let's take a look at two connected passages in Luke's Gospel, and then consider some words of wisdom from King Solomon that help us to come to terms with death—not from a worldly perspective that is filled with fear—but from a biblical view that offers hope and peace. The first scriptural passage appears in Luke 12 and the second one follows not long afterwards in Luke 13. In Luke 12 we find: ¹⁶ **And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'** ¹⁸ **"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'** ²¹ **"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."** Luke 12:16-21 (NIV)

It is often said that this parable of Jesus is designed tell us that there are more important things in this world than wealth. And, that is certainly true. But it also tells us something about the **brevity of life**. I think you will see a connection between what we just read in Luke 12 and the following short passage in Luke 13. Here it tells us: ¹ **Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."** Luke 13:1-5 (NIV)

If I had to look to one passage that ties together the central theme that Jesus is providing in these two passages from Luke's Gospel, I think King Solomon may offer the most concise summary. This wisest of men, stated: "[It is] **better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies— so the living should take this to heart.**" Ecclesiastes 7:2 (NLT2) Now that's a statement that our society would recoil at! Funerals are better than parties? Why would anyone say such a thing?

So what lessons come out of these three Scriptures? What can we learn from the **barn-builder** in Luke 12, and the **murdered Galileans** and **fallen Tower of Siloam** in Luke 13? And then, what is the connection regarding Solomon's preference for **funerals over parties**? Well, there are several lessons actually—and all of them are interrelated. First, consider the barn-builder who died the very night that all his barns had been completed and he thought that he had "**plenty of good things laid up for many years.**" He congratulated himself for being so industrious that he was now living life on "**easy street**" where he'd "**eat, drink and be merry.**" Here, was a man who firmly believed that he'd "**gotten his house in order.**" Have you ever heard that expression, "**I've got to get my house in order**"? I can't tell you how many times that I hear that at my office—people saying that they need to get their last will and testament done in order that they will "**have their house in order.**"

There is certainly nothing wrong with doing your will. Estate planning is not a bad thing. But when they finally sign their will and then leave my office with this great sign of relief and say, "**Now, I feel like I've finally got by house in order,**" I sometimes cringe a bit. I cringe because anyone who really believes that getting their **worldly belongings "in order"**, to the neglect of getting their "**spiritual house in order**"—well, they are only kidding themselves. Do you know why? Look, it doesn't matter how much, or how little, you may have as far as worldly things go. You may be a billionaire many times over, or little more than a pauper, but whatever physical possessions you may acquire in this world, they are merely temporal things. They will never last. I don't mean to sound so somber, but whatever you may own—houses, cars, fancy clothes, whatever—200 hundred years from now they will be nowhere to be found. The reality is that the very house you live in today will, in all likelihood, have long since been flattened. The cars you owned will be rusted to unrecognizable little hulks, and the clothes you once treasured will be dissolved into nothingness. Now, I'm not trying to put myself out of work as far as doing wills goes, but the truth is that whatever you put in your will to dispose of these things in the long run will be meaningless—these worldly things will be gone because they are only temporary. But those in Christ look to the things that are eternal. And because of that Paul proclaims: "**So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**" 2 Corinthians 4:18 (NIV) Don't worry about where your possessions will go when you die; worry about where **you** will go when you die.

So for those who gain a sense of relief by supposedly getting their worldly "**house in order**", they are only deceiving themselves and failing to attend to something that really does matter—something that was meant to last: And that something is your **eternal soul**. So rather than gaining a false sense of security by worldly estate planning, we need to focus instead on getting our spiritual act

together—do some *heavenly estate planning*. And don't wait, do it right now! That is exactly the lesson that Jesus' parable of the barn-builder teaches.

Well, what about Luke 13 and Jesus' comments about those people who were so tragically and instantly killed when Pilate's soldiers murdered them without warning, or when the Tower of Siloam suddenly fell on others crushing them to death? What is the lesson there? Is it: Don't irritate angry tyrants or hang around leaning towers? No. Rather, the lessons are two-fold: First of all, *life is short* and you never know when your number is up. Where does the Bible say that? Well, the thought is clearly expressed in the Book of Job. It tells us that God has "*decided the length of our lives. [He knows] know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer.*"¹ And that's the thing—no one knows when that last minute is coming. But it has been irrevocably set for each one of us—it could be today, it could be tomorrow. The reality is that we are, in a sense, ticking little time bombs with none of us without knowing the length of our burning fuses. And so, we'd all do well to join in with the Psalmist's plea to God when he said: "*Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.*" Psalm 90:12 (NLT2) And what is that "*wisdom*" that we need to grow in? It is learning that we are all sinners who must repent of our sins and accept Jesus Christ. And the second lesson is pretty simple and goes hand in hand with the first one—and it is this: You can only repent while you are above ground and while you are still breathing. In other words, don't wait a minute longer to accept Jesus and repent of your sins. Once you die—and that could happen any given minute—then, it's too late.

Now what about that "*funeral*" and "*party*" thing mentioned by King Solomon—what is the lesson there? Well, we are approaching the time when many colleges and universities are having spring break. And one thing that hasn't changed since I was in college is that many students will be making their annual trip to New Orleans to attend that big, on-going party called *Mardi Gras*. Try telling them that funerals are better than parties! And yet, what Jesus is saying in Luke's Gospel is directly connected to two incidents that happened just last month during the partying in New Orleans at Mardi Gras. Two people, on separate nights during the same week, were killed while partying in the streets of New Orleans. No—they weren't murdered during robberies nor were they the victims of drug overdoses. Rather, both partiers were killed when they were struck by floats during night-time parades. One was a 58 year-old woman who was apparently trying to cross the street between two parade floats but tripped and was crushed to death. What was her reason for being between to moving floats? One account has it she wanted to avail herself of some of the party-beads that she happened to see lying there in the

street—whether that is true or not, nobody knows. And, during last year’s Mardi Gras parades, nine people were hit by a car including two bicyclists who were killed—all at this great worldly party.²

Now when we hear of things happening like this, we immediately think, “**Oh those drunken sinners—what can you expect to happen to people like that!**” And though few would admit it publicly, secretly in the recesses of people’s minds some are saying to themselves, “**Well, they probably deserved it!**” But, you know what?—Jesus hears those silent thoughts as loudly as if they had screamed them out at the top of their lungs. And what reply does Jesus give to such thoughts? He gives the same reply that he gave His disciples 2,000 years ago: “**Unless YOU repent, YOU too will perish.**” Luke 13:1-5 (NIV) Of course, Jesus is talking about **death in the eternal sense**. Repentance and having faith in Him are the only protection to falling victim to that kind of hellish, eternal death. Jesus doesn’t want us to miss this point. That’s why He repeats the need for repentance twice in just this short passage of Scripture. “**Repent or perish**”—“**turn or burn**”: They are the options that confront all of humanity. Rather than focusing on what they believed to be the sins of those who died by the hands of Pilate’s soldier or who were crushed by a falling tower, Jesus urges His disciples and us to look inward. He told them, as he tells you and me, that we’d all be better off spending our time examining the sin infecting our own hearts than speculating on someone else’s sins.³

And in light of these things, what then can we gain from Solomon’s comments that **funerals are better than parties**? Well, in saying this, he helps us to remember something that many folks deliberately try to forget. Solomon helps us to remember that life will come to an end for everybody someday—for some sooner than others. The point of Solomon’s wisdom came to light for me last Monday when I was driving back from an appointment in Richmond. It was around noon time and I was “channel-hopping” on the radio. And I happened to hit WRVA 1140 AM during the *Rush Limbaugh Show*. Now, I have to tell you that I am not much attracted to radio talk shows—whether they are conservative or liberal. And I was getting ready to hit the station button to switch channels when I heard the voice of some lady who had called in by phone to speak to Rush. She mentioned that she was not so much concerned about the corona virus because, as she put it, “**when your time comes, it comes**”, or words to that effect. Now, as you may know, Rush Limbaugh, although he’s still on the air, is going through a very serious battle with advanced lung cancer. And so, he lives with the reality that his own longevity is in doubt. So, I pulled my hand back from the channel button because I wondered how Rush would address this lady’s comment under the circumstances in which he found himself to be in.

He said something that I found quite curious. Rush basically said that when people go to funerals, and when they get there to the casket, they secretly tell themselves that that will never

happen to them—i.e., they try to pretend that they will never die. And he indicated that, in his opinion, we have to do this because otherwise we'd live our lives in fear. Now, I found that comment fascinating in light of Rush Limbaugh's own precarious health condition. He seemed to be suggesting that that was his way of coping with the reality of his own coming death—whether that will be sooner or later in the future. So, how do we assess Rush's philosophical outlook from a Christian perspective?

The problem is that Limbaugh's outlook is accurate, but only so far as it describes a **worldly view of life and death**. And knowing that he is possibly dying of cancer, I pray that he will seek Solomon's logic in the verse we read early—let me re-read it: “[It is] **better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies— so the living should take this to heart.**” Ecclesiastes 7:2 (NLT2) So, how do we “**take heart in this**”? What is the logic of Solomon's thinking here? The logic is this: Funerals are reminders to us that everyone will one day die. This reminder is a good thing because it spurs us to action in repenting and seeking God's forgiveness of our sins. But, those who go through life with some kind of a false “**party**” mentality try to use their “**partying**” outlook as a means to distract themselves from the reality of death. And they do this in a vain attempt to push this reality away—because they **fear death**. But, when they push reality aside, they create a vacuum. And the only way they know to fill this vacuum is with the “**phony joy**” of a partier. What a terribly reckless and dangerous way to live your life! It's like skipping between party floats in the middle of the night.

But the Christian view of death is so radically different. When a person repents of their sins and comes to Jesus as the Lord of their life, there is no vacuum to be filled because those in Christ know that death did not hold their Savior and neither can it hold them. And because of this, our hearts need not be filled with fear nor be troubled in any way. For we know Jesus' assuring words when He said: ¹ “**Let not your heart be troubled. You are trusting God, now trust in Me.**” ² **There are many homes up there where my Father lives, and I am going to prepare them for your coming.** ³ **When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am. If this weren't so, I would tell you plainly. . .** ²⁷ **I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give isn't fragile like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid.**” John 14:1-3, 27 (TLB)

While it is true that our souls now dwell in these “**earthly tents**” that we call our “**bodies**”, we have a security and confidence that the unbeliever has never experienced. We have no reason to duck around towers or even avoid the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras or any other time for that matter because we know something that the unbeliever does not know. We know that it does not matter if these tents (our bodies) are crushed by a falling tower or flattened by a parade float or is even overcome by the corona virus—our souls are headed to a permanent realm where we'll live a life

eternal in God's Kingdom. If you don't believe me on this, then believe Paul who assures us of this: **"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."** 2 Corinthians 5:1 (NIV)

God's Word teaches us about the reality of death, but it helps us to see this reality from an eternal perspective. The odd thing is that you must ***die*** in order to ***live***. For as Paul says, we must **"count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."**⁴ And so we must ***die daily*** as we repent of sin in order to become more and more conformed to the image of Christ.⁵ Jesus described this eternal mindset as ***daily dying*** for Him and so He said: **"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it."** Luke 9:23–24 NLT

You see, it doesn't matter whether you are from Galilee or Gordonsville, or if you are rich or poor, young or old—it doesn't matter whether you deceive yourself with the false joy of a party or face the somber reality of your own mortality—one day, you are going to face your Maker.⁶ You can look into that casket and pretend all you want that it will never be you, but one day that's been set for you your number will be up and you'll be proven wrong. God's judgment will come upon each and every one of us.⁷ The question remains, are you ready? If you have any doubt whatsoever, then whatever you do, don't wait—repent and come to Jesus Christ today!

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ Job 14:5 You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer. (NLT2)

² Meryl Kornfield, "Two People have been killed by Mardi Gras parade floats in the past week," www.washingtonpost.com (February 23, 2020).

³ "Why did Jesus mention the tower of Siloam in Luke 13:4?" www.gotquestions.org.

⁴ Romans 6:11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (NASB)

⁵ Romans 8:29 For he knew all about us before we were born and he destined us from the beginning to share the likeness of his Son. This means the Son is the oldest among a vast family of brothers and sisters who will become just like him. (Passion NT)

⁶ Hebrews 9:27-28 ²⁷ And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so also Christ died once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him. (NLT2)

⁷ "How can I be prepared to die?" www.gotquestions.org.