

The First Five Minutes

by Richard E. Bieber

The sermon explores the profound implications of the first five minutes after death through the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, urging believers to live out their faith through acts of compassion and love.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Luke 16:19, John 10:27, James 2:14, 1 John 3:18

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Faith Works"

Description

Richard E. Bieber delves into the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16:19-31, exploring the contrasting experiences of these two men in the afterlife. He emphasizes the importance of understanding that salvation is not just a one-time event but a daily walk in obedience to God's will, demonstrated through acts of compassion and love towards those in need. Bieber challenges listeners to examine their hearts and ensure that their faith is reflected in their actions, echoing Jesus' teachings on the significance of doing the Father's will.

Transcript

(Based on Luke 16: 19-31)

Have you ever thought about what it's going to be like----those first five minutes after you die?

Your body has been left behind.

You no longer have eyes, but you can see.

You no longer have ears, but you can hear.

Your tongue is gone, yet you can speak.

Your spirit is now being energized by the Living God, who also is Spirit.

You are standing on the threshold of a totally different world.

Now what?

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that when you die it will be a blank nothing, no consciousness, until the Lord Jesus comes back to establish his kingdom on earth. Then, if you make the grade, you'll be raised from the dead.

The New Age folks are full of fascinating stories of near-death experiences. Beautiful music. Shining lights.

Our Lord Jesus does not focus so much on those first five minutes after we die. His focus is mainly on the Climax of all things, when he returns to straighten out the mess we've made of things and establish his Kingdom as the true New Age.

But Jesus does give us a glimpse of those first five minutes, and then some, in his parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. He begins by describing their experience on this side of the grave. The Rich Man is living the good life. Beautiful clothes. Excellent food. He's wearing purple and fine linen, perhaps indicative of a close connection to the Temple and the Synagogue, He's a religious man, no doubt.

Lazarus, the beggar is sitting at the gate of the Rich Man's estate, covered with sores, surrounded by a few dogs that lick his wounds as his only friends. Lazarus would like to have a few crumbs from the Rich Man's table, but it never happens. Perhaps the Rich Man figures, "If I start giving food to this beggar, he'll never leave." Or maybe the Rich Man is too busy with his church duties to pay attention to the repulsive bag of flesh parked at his gate. Maybe the Rich Man holds his head so high that he doesn't even notice the misery in his path.

Both men die. Suddenly they're spirits on the "other side." Their bodies have already begun to decompose, but their spirits are very much alive and conscious. Lazarus the beggar is carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. In other words, he's in Paradise. He's being compensated for the misery he experienced in this world. The Rich Man sinks down into Hades, the region of the dead, a place of anguish. His spirit is suffering in a painful spiritual fire.

So, those first five minutes.....What Lazarus experiences in those first five minutes is mercy, comfort. Heaven is making it up to him for all his earthly misery. As far as we know, Lazarus never prayed the Sinner's Prayer in this world. He never got saved. He never received the Baptism of the Spirit. But here he is in Paradise!

Those first five minutes for the Rich Man are very different. Even though he's a member of the Chosen People, even though he knows Abraham as his Father. "Father Abraham!" he cries. This man is suffering as he never suffered in his earthly life. How can this be? How can this man, one of the Chosen People, end up in a place like this?

Now you may think that God was a little too easy on Lazarus. After all, Lazarus was a sinner too. How come he gets all the breaks? And you may feel that God was much too severe with the Rich Man. After all, we all make mistakes. We all get careless. But flames of fire?

Jesus gives us this parable, because this is how it works. Those first five minutes after we die are full of surprises. Things happen that we do not expect. Good and Bad. It all depends.

So where do we fit in this picture? When we take this parable of Jesus and apply it to ourselves, who of us can say, "Well, I'm Lazarus. I've been out there begging for crumbs all my life. But Father Abraham is waiting for me on the other side. He's going to make it up to me."?

No. We are not Lazarus. No one reading these words is likely to be Lazarus. We are the Rich Man! Every one of us reading these words is the Rich Man! Except for one thing, of course: we're still alive. There's still time for us to take in what Jesus is telling us in this parable.

Now I know, in our churches these days we never talk about the dark side of things: Judgment.....Consequences.....Outer Darkness.....Flames. Give me a break! Who believes in that stuff these days!

After all, Jesus died for everybody.

"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Salvation is a gift! Paid for by the Lamb's blood.

Didn't Jesus take our sins upon himself and wash them away?

Aren't we born again?

Aren't we numbered with the elect? The chosen?

"Many are called, but few are chosen."

Why would we be sitting in our churches, if we weren't among the chosen?

But here's the part of our Lord's gospel many of us are missing.....

Yes it's true, salvation, eternal life, being born again----all this is indeed a gift. It's not something we can earn or deserve.

All we have to do is open our hearts and receive it.

"Here I am, Lord! I repent of myself. I throw myself on your mercy. I'd turn myself over to you. Wash me! Cleanse me! Fill me with your Spirit. Guide me in your will!"

If you pray that prayer with integrity, God answers it swiftly. The Spirit of God begins to move in your life.

Your eyes open to things you never saw before.

You find yourself able to pray as you never could before.

Scripture comes alive.

You're born again!!

But....Does this mean that you're all set forever? Your in? You've got it made?

From God's side this could be true. You're in the Shepherd's protecting hand. You're safe from all outside danger and harm.

But from your side, there's still an "if."

"If you abide in me and my words abide in you....."

"If you walk in the light as he is in the light."

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Yes, I'm saved. I'm born of God. I'm baptized in the Spirit. But as I walk along the path of faith, there's this beggar crying out to me in his need.

This person who needs a phone call with an encouraging word.

This man who needs a ride to the hospital in my car.

This woman who needs money for groceries to feed her kids.

This young person who needs a listening ear --- someone to pay attention.

The Spirit of God shines his light on one soul in that crowd of needy ones, and says, "This one is for you. Go take care of it."

If I'm one of the chosen ones...if I'm truly born again, I'm going to take care of my Lazarus, and every Lazarus that God puts in my path. Otherwise, my salvation is a sham. My rebirth is an egg that never hatched.

This is not my opinion, Friend, this is Jesus' gospel! He makes crystal clear that salvation is not a "state", it's a life lived. It's not a ticket you present to your keeper on the other side of death, it's a daily walk in the footsteps of the Master.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me....

They follow me.

They do what I do.

They wash feet.

They reach out to the forgotten.

They open the eyes of the blind and set the captives free.

And I give them eternal life. And they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

One day soon, barring the return of the Master in the meantime, each of us will find ourselves on the other side, with the Rich Man and Lazarus. And we'll understand first-hand what the Lord Jesus was talking about when he told us --- we who claim to be his disciples---that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who do the Father's will.

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'

And I will declare to them, I never knew you....

While you were busy prophesying and casting out demons, you walked past Lazarus a thousand times. No one who belongs to me could ever do that!"

When we gather to break bread in our fellowships, we hear a word from our Lord Jesus which is quite different. A word, not of judgment, but of awesome love, of holy comfort:

"This is my body, given for you.

For you, as if you were the only one in the world."

"This is the blood of the New Covenant, shed for your sins.

Your sins... Your sins are forgiven."

And when you leave your fellowship, you do not walk alone. The Master walks with you. He even walks in you. He is your salvation. He is your eternal life.

And he, Jesus, in each of us who partakes of him, guides us to our Lazarus. He convicts us when we try to ignore our Lazarus. He pleads with our conscience when we turn our backs and walk away from our Lazarus.

Because, the living Lord Jesus will abide in us, as we abide in him....by walking in his will.

And if we walk with him faithfully on this side of death, we'll still be walking with him on the other side....

....not only in the first five minutes, but forever.

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