

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 23, 2011**

## **ETERNITY ON MY MIND**

### **2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10**

Suppose we were to inject each of you with truth serum and then ask you to answer the question, “What’s on your mind today?” What would your answer be? What *is* on your mind today?

It is *not* very spiritual, I know, but the truth is that some of us have football on our minds today. I like football (especially when the Steelers win). But I am so glad there is more to life than football, and my joy in life is not dependent on the outcome of any game. Including today. That’s all I’m going to say about that. This is now a football-free zone.

Your health, or the health of someone you love, may be on your mind today, particularly if you’re dealing with a distressing diagnosis, or a debilitating illness, or any kind of pain that won’t go away. If you’re a parent, regardless of how young or how old your kids are, they are probably always on your mind. That is just the way it is when you’re a parent. Or, maybe you’ve got your parents on your mind, if they are approaching or have entered a season of life in which they look to you for support or care. Living here in Washington, where it is part of the air we breathe and the water we drink, it wouldn’t be a surprise if some of you have politics or the economy constantly on your mind. Some of you guys probably have a girl on your mind. And some of you girls probably have a guy on your mind. Some of you, perhaps, have a dream of some kind or an unfulfilled longing on your mind. Maybe you have your job situation on your mind. Maybe what is on your mind is a wound of some kind, and you long to be healed from it. You might even have something more mundane on your mind, like wondering where you left your keys or your cell phone.

Lots of people have money or financial security on their minds, even to the point of making an idol of it. Remember the rich man Jesus talked about in Luke 12? You can read the story for yourself in Luke 12:15-21. This guy was the epitome of worldly success. He had accumulated so much wealth that he didn’t know what to do with it all. He didn’t have enough room to store it all. So, what did he do? He decided to build bigger barns. If he had larger warehouses in which to store all his stuff, then he could sit back and take life easy. Which is exactly what he intended to do. He was going to “eat, drink, and be merry.” He was financially secure. He had everything he needed – and a lot more. He was going to enjoy the good life.

There was only one problem. He forgot to factor God into the equation of his life. He was an unqualified success in the eyes of the world. He was the kind of guy people would look up to and want to emulate. But God said to him: “You’re a fool. Tonight you’re going to die. Then what is going to happen to all this stuff of yours? You can’t take it with you. Who will get it now?”

Then Jesus delivered the punch line of the parable: “This,” He said, “is how it will be with anyone who stores up things (riches or wealth) for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

Lots of people wrongly believe that the essence of their existence is wrapped up in the abundance of their possessions. But Jesus said: “It ain’t so.” (That is not a direct quote, I know. As far as I know, Jesus never used the word “ain’t.” I just use it in a shameless attempt to grab your attention, in case your mind happens to be wandering.)

In His introduction to the story of this rich fool, Jesus said: “Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot” (12:15, *The Message*). Jesus did not want to leave anyone in doubt about this. There is more to life than money. The value or significance of your life is not determined by the wealth or possessions you accumulate.

Do you have money or the pursuit of wealth on your mind today? Be careful that you do not let it become an idol in your life. In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says that, like life itself, “money is both a *test* and a *trust* from God. God uses finances to teach us to trust Him, and for many people, money is the greatest test of all. God watches how we use money to see how trustworthy we are” (p. 46). There is, as Warren points out, a direct relationship between how we view and use money, and the quality of our spiritual life.

When he gave his first sermon in a preaching class, a student from Africa named Lawrence chose a text dealing with the joys that await us in heaven. This is how he began: “I have been in the United States for several months now. I have seen the great wealth that is here – the fine homes and cars and clothes. I have listened to many sermons in churches here, too. But I have yet to hear one sermon about heaven. Because everyone has so much in this country, no one preaches about heaven. People here don’t seem to need it. In my country most people have very little, so we preach on heaven all the time. We know how much we need it” (Bryan Chapell, *The Wonder of It All*).

Do you have any idea how much you and I need the promise and hope of heaven? How much we need to approach all of life with eternity in view?

What *is* on your mind today? Whatever your exact circumstances may be, whatever you are dealing with in life, I believe God wants you and me – each of us and all of us – to live today and every day with eternity on our mind. I believe God wants us to live moment by moment, day by day, in the light of eternity.

Debbie Smith reminded us earlier of what Paul wrote in Colossians 3:1-2: “Since you have been raised (from spiritual death to new life) with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” The New Living Translation (NLT) of verse 2 says: “Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth.” What all this means is that God wants us to focus the attention of our minds and hearts on the eternal rather than what is temporal. He wants us to have eternity on our mind.

You probably know about the rich young man who came running to Jesus on one occasion. He actually had eternity on his mind. (The story is found in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18.) We know he had eternity on his mind because of the question he asked the Lord Jesus. He wanted to know what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life. He was looking for some assurance, I think, some affirmation from Jesus, that he was on the right track and that, because he was a devout, morally upright, respected member of the community, he had nothing to worry about. Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount the conversation Jesus had with him. If you know the story, you know it does not have a happy ending. The young man went away disappointed, with a heavy heart, when he didn't get the answer from Jesus he was hoping for.

His question to Jesus was right on target: "How can I be sure of eternal life?" But his reaction to the response of Jesus showed that, while he had some interest in eternal things, the attachment of his heart to his earthly possessions prevented him from trusting and obeying and following Jesus. Like lots and lots of people today, he wanted eternal life on his own terms. I hope it is not true of anyone here today.

What is the big deal about living with eternity in view? Why should you and I have eternity on our mind? For starters, because there is more to life than this earthly life. I really like the way Rick Warren fleshes this out in *The Purpose Driven Life*. (By the way, I know many of you have read *The Purpose Drive Life*. We read it, studied it, talked about it as a church family several years ago. Many of you were part of that. Or maybe you read it on your own, or as part of another church before the Lord brought you here. If you have not read it, I commend the book to you with immense enthusiasm. If you read it several years ago, I encourage you to read it again. I've come back to different parts of the book on several occasions, and I have been blessed by it each time. So I commend it to you all.)

Here is what Warren writes: "This life is not all there is... One day your heart will stop beating. That will be the end of your body and your time on earth, but it will not be the end of you. Your earthly body is just a temporary residence for your spirit. The Bible calls your earthly body a 'tent,' but refers to your future body as a 'house'" (pp. 36, 37).

That is exactly what Paul says in this passage we read from 2 Corinthians 4-5. Notice how Paul describes our situation in this earthly life, beginning in 4:16: "Outwardly [a reference to our physical, mortal bodies] we are wasting away." Isn't that the truth! I once heard another EPC pastor (Jim Dixon) say that these bodies of ours, like the pyramids of Egypt, are eroding with time. As true as the analogy may be, it is pretty obvious that our bodies are eroding a lot faster than the pyramids. At least mine is!

This is how it is with us: Botox doesn't last forever. Wrinkle lines appear or reappear and get deeper. Some of us go bald. We don't see or hear as well as we once did. Our joints get stiff. Arthritis sets in. Some of our original parts need to be replaced. Out get-up-and-go seems to have got-up-and-went without us. You know what I'm saying. And if you don't yet, if you live long enough, you will.

These bodies of ours don't and won't last forever. The Bible, in James 4:14, compares this life to a vapor or mist that appears for a short time and then vanishes. David acknowledges in Psalm 144:4 that our lives here on earth are like a breath, and our days like a fleeting shadow. Temporary. Transient. Eroding with time. Like a tent (5:1) which gets beaten down by the storms and stresses and hardships of life in this world. When you are young, sometimes you think you will live forever. You think you are invincible. You think nothing really bad can happen to you. But you are wrong. Bad things – terrible things – can and sometimes do happen when you are young and think you have a long, full life ahead. You are not invincible. Nobody is. You will not live forever. Nobody does. The Bible says that, unless Jesus comes back first, everyone will have an appointment with death (Hebrews 9:27). No exceptions.

Sooner or later, we are all going to die. Take to heart the words of Moses in Psalm 90: “The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength” (90:10). It is true that, in His grace, God gives some people more than eighty years. It is also true that not everyone lives to see the age of seventy. The point is that our time here on earth is limited. In light of this truth, Moses went on to pray in verse 12: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” In other words, whether our years on earth be many or few, help us, O Lord, to live wisely, and to serve you with gladness (Psalm 100:2a) all our days.

You may not believe the story I'm about to tell you, but it is true. A Japanese man named Tsutomu Yamaguchi was on a business trip in Hiroshima on the morning of August 6, 1945, when the *Enola Gay* dropped the first atomic bomb on that city. The bomb killed 140,000 people, but Yamaguchi survived, though his face and arms were burned, he experienced temporary blindness, and his hearing was damaged. The next day, on August 7, Yamaguchi was able to travel home from Hiroshima to Nagasaki. As you probably know, an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9. As had been the case three days earlier, Yamaguchi saw a great flash of light. This time he was knocked unconscious by the force of the blast, but was not seriously hurt. The death toll in Nagasaki was around 70,000 people. But Yamaguchi, for a second time, had lived through an atomic blast.

Incredibly, a total of 165 people are believed to have survived the atomic blasts in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though Yamaguchi was the only person officially recognized by the Japanese government as having lived through both.

Why do I tell you his story? For this reason: Here is a man who survived not one but two atomic bombs. You might think that if anyone could cheat death forever, maybe, just maybe he might be the one. It is not going to happen. Yamaguchi lived almost 65 years after the bombs were dropped, but he finally had his appointment with death about a year ago, in January 2010, at the age of 93. Sooner or later, death happens to everybody.

You may live to be 113, like Mississippi Winn from Shreveport, Louisiana, who died last week. *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy knew her as “one of my church ladies” from his boyhood in Shreveport and wrote a warm tribute to her in the *Post Metro* section this past week (Section B, pp. 1, 5, Wednesday, January 19, 2011). For me, it was a case of encountering biblical truth in an unexpected place(!). Reflecting on Miss Winn's long life

and now her passing, Milloy wrote: “How easy to forget that life is a terminal condition, no exemptions, and that every moment counts. If you need to call a parent, visit a friend, make amends – do it sooner rather than later. No matter how long we live, it won’t be forever.” Amen, Brother Milloy!

113 years is a long time to live, but it is not eternity (even if it may seem like it at times). Since this life is not going to last forever, it is wise to live with eternity on your mind. Listen to Warren again on this. It is true that death is the destiny of every person, but “death is not the end of you! Death is not your termination, but your transition into eternity. So there are *eternal* consequences to everything you do on earth” (*PDL*, p. 38).

I’m sure many of you remember what the Roman General Maximus (Russell Crowe) said to his men just before they went into battle in the movie *Gladiator*. “What we do now echoes in eternity.” It is true. For many years, theologian R. C. Sproul has written a monthly column for Ligonier Ministries’ *Tabletalk* magazine under the banner “Right Now Counts Forever.” It does. Because this life is not all there is, what we do in this life takes on eternal significance.

This life is a prelude to eternity. For everyone who truly turns in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, it is a prelude to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Here is Warren again: If you know Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, “you don’t need to fear death. It is the door to eternity. It will be the last hour of your time on earth, but it won’t be the last of you. Rather than being the end of your life, it will be your birthday into eternal life” (*PDL*, p. 40).

The most important thing you can ever do to prepare for eternity is admit your sinfulness and your inability to make yourself fit for heaven, to turn away from your sins and put your trust in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for you. It is the only way you can be ready. It is the only way anybody can be ready. Then, for as long as you live, as a way of showing your gratitude and love for His grace shown to you, make it your aim, as Paul says in 5:9, to please God. Let this be your goal from now to eternity.

Matthew Henry, Bible commentator and pastor in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, once said: “It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our final day.”

A seventh-century believer named Isaac the Syrian gave this counsel: “Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour.”

What both were saying is that we should live every moment, every hour, every day, with eternity on our mind. If we have eternity in view, we will see, as Paul bears witness in 4:17, that the sufferings of this life are “light and momentary troubles” when compared to the weight of the “eternal glory” that awaits us on the other side of death. In fact, though the suffering you endure in this life may seem to be anything but “light and momentary troubles,” by faith we affirm and declare that there is no comparison between them and the blessings God has in store for us in eternity. In this we walk by faith, not by sight (5:7), trusting God and His faithfulness.

There is much more we could glean from this passage. Let me encourage you to take time today, if possible, to read it again in a quiet place. And make note of the several contrasts Paul highlights between our life here on earth and what lies ahead in eternity for all who by faith embrace Christ as Savior and Lord.

What is on your mind today? May we all live today and every day with eternity on our mind. Why? Because there is more to life than this life. Because someday you are going to die. But the end of your life here on earth is not the end of you.

Why live with eternity on your mind? Because, in the words of Puritan pastor Thomas Boston, this life is a short preface to a long eternity. Because the choices you make now and the way you live here on earth really do count forever. They will echo in eternity. And because this world, as attractive and enticing and appealing as it may be, is not your home. God has something far better planned for you.

I'm looking forward to it more and more as this body of mine "erodes with time," and as I see more and more clearly the amazing grace and love and faithfulness of God.

May it be so in all of us, to the glory of His name. Amen.