

Cemetery Lessons

Pastor James Foley – Shared Sunday, June 27, 2021

INTRODUCTION

FYI 1 – For those who may not know, my father passed in August of 2018. I cannot believe that it has already been nearly three years! Since his passing, I have taken the habit to periodically visit the cemetery where he is buried in W. Boylston (i.e., once per month).

FYI 2 – To be clear, I do not go to commune and/or talk with my father in any way, for I know that his spirit is with the Lord in heaven. Rather, I go to check his gravesite (i.e., to see how well the grounds are tended to, etc.), and nearly always with my mother, Betty.

FYI 3 – Over the years doing this, a series of lessons have been reaffirmed in my heart. I have come to see that there is much to learn in a cemetery! Thus said, it is my desire to share some thoughts with you in a standalone sermon entitled, “Cemetery Lessons.”

LESSON #1

To begin, I have come to understand the value in both stillness and quiet.

NOTE 1 – If there are two words that I would use to describe a graveyard, still and quiet are likely two of the best I could offer. I would say that there is a “dead silence” at the cemetery, but that pun may be too obvious! One thing is for sure: when you enter cemetery, you are just about guaranteed to be the “loudest” one there.

NOTE 2 – I have come to discover the benefit in such a tranquil, calm environment (i.e., particularly in a setting with “natural” beauty). In a world of incessant white-noise and soul-numbing distraction, there is something healthful about retreating to a serene place to practice the art of stillness. May I ask you a series of rel. Q’s...

Q. When was the last time you were ‘still’ before the Lord?

Q. When was the last time you allowed yourself a period of silence?

Q. When was the last time you knew a moment of calm, tranquil serenity?

KEY 1 – The Bible has much to say about stillness—particularly stillness before the Lord...

Psalm 46:10 (NIV)

“Be still, and know that I am God”

Psalm 37:7

7 Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him . . .

Psalm 131:2

2 . . . I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.

KEY 2 – The Bible establishes that Jesus often retreated from the crowds to connect with God in serenity...

Mark 1:35 (Following a Busy Season of Ministry, Emphasis Mine)

35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a **solitary place**, where he **prayed**.

Luke 5:15 (As His Work and Ministry Were Burgeoning, Emphasis Mine)

15 . . . the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But Jesus **often** withdrew to **lonely places** and **prayed**.

KEY 3 – If it is the will of the Father to conform us into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:29), perhaps we should aspire to such an example. Perhaps it is time to spend some time alone with the Lord in a solitary, still place. As I have found, there is blessing to be found in such a setting (i.e., even a graveyard)!

LESSON #2

Secondly, the cemetery forces me to consider my own mortality.

KEY – This may sound morbid, but I posit that there is value in recognizing the “finite” nature of life...

NOTE 1 – The Bible continually addresses the brevity of life (i.e., even if we are uncomfortable w/ the topic)...

James 4:14b

14 . . . What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Psalms 39:5

5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.

Psalms 144:3–4

3 Lord, what are human beings that you care for them,
mere mortals that you think of them?
4 They are like a breath;
their days are like a fleeting shadow.

QUOTE 1 – “Here is the history of the grass—sown, grown, blown, mown, and gone; and the history of mankind is not much more.” C. H. Spurgeon

NOTE 2 – Recognizing my mortality causes me to sharpen my life & living (i.e., diligence w/ the time I have)...

QUOTE 2 – “Even in our best shape we are a brittle piece of morality. Your life is but a breath; don’t waste it.”
Lacrae, Christian Performing Artist

John 9:4

4 “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”

Ephesians 5:15–17

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

Psalms 90:3–6, 12

3 You turn people back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”

4 A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.

5 Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning:

6 In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.

12 Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

LESSON #3

Thirdly, the cemetery reminds me that there is a certain “equity” in death.

NOTE 1 – The people buried in my father’s cemetery, I am sure, had many things that differentiated them (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic levels, political leanings, hobbies and interests, talents and capacities, dreams and desires, etc.). However, they all had at least one thing in common: they all experienced death (i.e., the same end and outcome).

NOTE 2 – The same is true of us today! There may be many things that differentiate the living (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic levels, political leanings, hobbies and interests, talents and capacities, dreams and desires, etc.). However, we all have at least one thing in common: we will all taste of death (i.e., the same end and outcome)...

KEY 1 – All of the varied paths of life and living ultimately and inevitably converge in death...

Ecclesiastes 9:2, 12 (Concerning Death)

2 All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. . . . 12 . . . no one knows when their hour will come.

KEY 2 – Moreover, it would seem that death is “no respecter” of persons.

I am by no means great at mathematics, but I can add and subtract. During my visits to the cemetery, I will occasionally calculate how old people were when they died (i.e., based upon the dates carved chiseled on their headstones). Yes, this may be a bit morbid, but...

Q. You know what I have found?

A. Not everyone lives to a ripe, old age.

In fact, I am amazed at how many people experienced “untimely” deaths. Young men, women, teens, children and even infants! It is tragic yet true. I would say this is a principle we have been exposed to in recent months (i.e., with the unexpected passing of Michael Watson, Scott Long and Charlie Pickett). You simply never know when your time is up...

Therefore...

1) The Only Way to Live is in a Perpetual State of Trust...

QUOTE – “We cannot enjoy peace in this world unless we are ready to yield to the will of God in respect of death. Our times are in His hand, at His sovereign disposal. We must accept that as best.” John Owen, Theologian

2) The Only Way to Live is in a Perpetual State of Readiness...

QUOTE 1 – “They, then, who are destined to die, need not be careful to inquire what death they are to die, but into what place death will usher them.” Augustine

QUOTE 2 – “When it is your time to die, be sure it is all you have to do.”

LESSON #4

Thus said, there is certainly NO equity (i.e., equal end or outcome) in eternity.

NOTE – The Bible presents a great distinction between the fate of the righteous and the wicked...

Matthew 7:13–14

13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Matthew 25 (The Sheep and the Goats, Emphasis Mine)

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right [i.e., the righteous], ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ . . .

41 “Then he will say to those on his left [i.e., wicked], ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ . . . 46 Then they will go away to **eternal punishment**, but the righteous to **eternal life.**”

Revelation 21:1–8

1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Luke 16:19–31

19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

25 “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

27 “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

29 “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

30 “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

31 “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Once again...

QUOTE – “They, then, who are destined to die, need not be careful to inquire what death they are to die, but into what place death will usher them.” Augustine

LESSON #5

The cemetery has reminded me that it is better to have Jesus in your heart than on your tombstone.

NOTE 1 – It amazes me how “Christianized” most gravestones are. Nearly all of them have a cross, some religious imagery, biblical passages or iconography, declarations of hope and/or professions of faith, and so forth. Yet I can only wonder how many truly knew Christ (personally) in their lives and living!

Hear me clearly...

NOTE 2 – God does not judge us by the profession of faith on our tombstones, but the faith that we possess—or reject—in this life. This principle is comparable to how many people wear a cross around their neck but refuse to carry one before and/or unto Christ (cf. Matt. 16:24–25)

KEY – The Lord has never placed value in religiosity or sacred observance, but in faith-filled, sincere devotion...

Luke 6:46

46 “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

Matthew 15:8 (cf. Isa. 29:13)

8 “These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.”

Isaiah 1:10–20

10 Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
11 “The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the Lord.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed
festivals
I hate with all my being.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;

even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.

17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

18 “Come now, let us settle the matter,”
says the Lord.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.

19 If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the good things of the land;
20 but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

LESSON #6

These lessons—in total—should compel us to reach as many as we can!

Q. How should we respond in light of the brevity of life, the certainty of death or the reality of the afterlife?

A. Let us devote ourselves to the standing order of Christ and get to work winning souls for time and eternity...

Matthew 28:18–20

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Mark 16:15–16

15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

FYI – Did you realize that 65 million people die each year? 178,000 per day; 7,425 per hour; 120 per minute...

Q. How many are slipping into Christ-less eternity unwarned and unprepared?

QUOTE – A converted man does not want to go to heaven alone.” J. C. Ryle

LESSON #7

Lastly, the cemetery has taught me to appreciate the living while they are here.

NOTE – There is something rather final about death (i.e., even though we recognize the reality of the afterlife). You cannot commune, speak to or share life with the dead, which makes death so hard! Therefore, if there is to be any communion, conversation or sharing, it must happen in this life and in the here-and-now...

If you're ever going to love me love me now, while I can know
 All the sweet and tender feelings which from real affection flow.
 Love me now, while I am living; do not wait till I am gone
 And then chisel it in marble — warm love words on ice-cold stone.
 If you have dear, sweet thoughts about me, why not whisper them to me?
 Don't you know 'twould make me happy and as glad as glad could be?
 If you wait till I am sleeping, ne'er to waken here again,
 There'll be walls of earth between us and I couldn't hear you then.
 If you knew someone was thirsting for a drop of water sweet
 Would you be so slow to bring it? Would you step with laggard feet?
 There are tender hearts all round us who are thirsting for our love;
 Why withhold from them what nature makes them crave all else above?
 I won't need your kind caresses when the grass grows o'er my face;
 I won't crave your love or kisses in my last low resting place.
 So, then, if you love me any, if it's but a little bit,
 Let me know it now while living; I can own and treasure it.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for joining us today! Allow me to close with the following...

NOTE 1 – Those who wish to give online may do so at www.NewLifeBarre.org. Those who wish to give in person can utilize the offering boxes located throughout the church facility. Thank you for your faithfulness in supporting the work of the Lord!

NOTE 2 – With COVID-19 behind us we are beginning to reestablish ministries and events. The Potluck Supper resumes today (FYI – special guests – the Pickett family); Sunday School is set to resume on August 1. Moreover, we are also coordinating a Family Fun Day “outreach” for July and a Church Picnic in August (more info. to come).

NOTE 3 – Those who wish to linger in this sanctuary may feel free to do so. This is to be a house of prayer, so those who feel the need to pray may do so as they please. Moreover, I would be more than happy to pray with those who have need.

KEY – I close with the following...

Numbers 6:24–26

24 ““The Lord bless you
and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.””