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## DON'T WASTE THE NEW YEAR

John 11:1-16, 25-27

By

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December 26, 2010  
Special New Year's message

Don't Waste the New Year  
John 11:1-16, 25-27

Don't you hate waste? When you hear about how the government often wastes our money, it's sickening. I saw it firsthand on a very small scale when I was in Coast Guard boot camp. On one occasion, the mess hall served us steaks for dinner, which was a nice treat, of course! But someone had ordered far too many steaks. The cooks were piling three or four steaks on every plate. Since we were not allowed to take any food out of the mess hall, most of those steaks ended up in the trash. As I reluctantly dumped my extra steaks into a trash can full of steaks, I thought about all the hungry people who were probably within ten minutes of the base. Waste is wrong!

But far worse than wasting steaks is wasting lives, which God created for His purpose. We waste our lives by wasting our time, because how we spend our time is how we spend our lives. What if you had \$1,440 in the bank that you had to spend every day? None of it could be carried over to the next day. It would not be easy to use that money wisely!

The fact is, each of us *does* have 1,440 *minutes* every day to use for some purpose. If you live through next year, you'll have 8,760 hours to spend. Allowing eight hours per day for sleep and eight more for work, meals, and commuting time (we're not figuring in days off), it only leaves 2,920 hours. How will you use those hours that God has entrusted to you? Will you use them in light of eternity? Or, will you waste a significant amount of time on things that really don't matter?

My mother's recent death, along with the upcoming New Year, made me think about the importance of living in light of eternity. My parents used to have a wall plaque by our front door with the motto, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." That is not to say that every waking minute must be used for "spiritual" purposes. The Lord knows that we all have to go shopping, fix meals, clean house, mow lawns, maintain cars, and pay bills. We all need a certain amount of "down" time. But all

that aside, we do need to consider using our time in ways that further God's purposes. Since Jesus gave Himself on the cross to redeem us from this evil world, it would be an utter tragedy to waste our lives.

Jesus is our great example of how to spend our time productively for God's purposes. He waited until He was about 30 to begin His ministry. Couldn't He have accomplished a lot more if He had begun at 21 or 25? Apparently, not! Then, in three short years, He launched a ministry with a bunch of unlikely men that has changed history. Yet He never seemed rushed or hassled. He always had time for people whom many would brush off—an immoral Samaritan woman; a blind beggar; an insane demoniac; and, many others.

How did He do it? At the core of everything was His communion with the Father and His complete submission to His will. There is a recurring theme in John's Gospel about "the hour" (2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:2, 4, 25, 32; 17:1). In our text, it comes out in Jesus' sense of timing as to when He should go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. He explains it to the disciples in a parable about the hours of daylight and darkness (11:9-10). There are many wonderful lessons in this chapter about Jesus' power over death and His ministry to us in our trials and grief. But I'd like to focus on our use of time:

We use our time correctly only when we live in submission to God's purposes in light of eternity.

First, let's look at what Jesus said and did here and then we'll apply it to our lives.

1. Jesus used His time correctly by living in submission to God's purposes in light of eternity.

Jesus was ministering somewhere east of the Jordan River to avoid the attempts of the Jewish leaders to seize Him (10:39-40) when word came that His friend Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, was sick. The usual view is that Lazarus had died shortly after the messengers left. They arrived late that same day and gave Jesus the news. He stayed two days longer where He was (11:6), then spent a day traveling to Bethany, where He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

But D. A. Carson (*The Gospel According to John* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 407-408) argues that Jesus was farther away than a day's travel. When the messengers arrived, Lazarus was still alive (11:4). After the two-day delay, Jesus states that Lazarus had died (11:11, 14). Then Jesus traveled four days to Bethany, where He found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days (11:17). But, either way, the account makes it plain that Lazarus could not just have been in a coma. His body was beginning to decompose. Jesus' calling Lazarus from the tomb was both a demonstration of His supernatural power and a powerful object lesson that He is the resurrection and the life, so that whoever believes in Him will live even if he dies (11:25-26).

To consider how Jesus used His time, it is instructive to note both how He did *not* make decisions and how He made them:

A. How Jesus did *not* make decisions:

- (1) Jesus did not make decisions based on the pressure of His friends (11:1-4).

In verse 2, John identifies Mary by pointing ahead to what may have been a familiar incident to many of his readers (12:1-8), how Mary anointed Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wiped His feet with her hair. It shows Mary's devotion to the Lord and how the appeal of one so close to the Lord must have tugged on His heart. This is intensified by the way the messengers identified Lazarus, "He whom You love is sick." Jesus loved all people, of course, but Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were Jesus' special friends. They had a close relationship centered on the things of God.

Thus it seems strange to read that when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was. You would think that He would have quickly ended what He was doing beyond the Jordan and hurried to Bethany. Or He could have healed Lazarus from a distance. But He didn't make decisions based on the pressure of even His closest friends. Rather, as we'll see in a moment, He made decisions based on God's purposes.

This doesn't mean, of course, that you should not seek the counsel of wise Christian friends. God gives us such friends so that we don't make mistakes that we are blind to. But doing the will of God must be uppermost in our decisions. For example, sometimes

your family and friends may not want you to move to another country to serve the Lord because they enjoy your company here. Jim Elliot's parents did not want him to go to South America and tried to encourage him to stay and serve the Lord in the U.S. But he felt impelled to take the gospel to the unreached tribes in South America, where he was killed at age 28 (see *Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan], by Elisabeth Elliot, pp. 128-133).

- (2) Jesus did not make decisions based on the emotions of the moment (11:5-6).

John notes Jesus' special love for Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus. But Jesus didn't allow His feelings for these friends to push Him into panic mode. Rather, He calmly stayed where He was at for two days and then made the trip to Bethany.

How many of our decisions are based more on the emotions of the moment instead of calmly thinking through what the will of God might be in this situation? Generally, emotional decisions based upon the pressure of the moment are not going to be the wisest decisions. At the very least, pause, pray, and think through the situation in light of Scripture before you act.

- (3) Jesus did not make decisions based on the threats of His enemies (11:7-11).

When Jesus told the disciples, "Let's go to Judea again," their response was (11:8), "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" This is a thinly veiled way of saying, "Are You crazy? Do You want to die?" And you get the feeling that their underlying thinking was, "If we go there with Jesus, we might die, too!" But Jesus didn't decide where to go or serve on the basis of the threats of His enemies (see Luke 13:31-32). He did God's will without being frightened by His enemies.

While there is a place for due caution and sometimes for fleeing for your life (Acts 9:23-25, 29-30), it is also true that it is safer to be with Jesus in a place of danger than to be without Jesus in a place of seeming safety. If we're doing what God has called us to do, we should not be deterred by the threats of those who oppose His work (see Nehemiah 4, 6).

B. How Jesus *did* make decisions:

- (1) Jesus made decisions based on what would glorify God (11:4).

“But when Jesus heard this, He said, ‘This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it’” (11:4). This is a remarkable statement in that it reveals Jesus’ knowledge of the future and that He would raise Lazarus from the dead. Also, Jesus put Himself on the same level as God, claiming that He would share the glory of this event with God. Can you imagine a religious leader saying, “I’m going to perform a miracle so that God will be glorified and I’m going to be glorified, too”? What arrogance and blasphemy! But Jesus could say these things. Since God is very jealous about not sharing His glory with any man (Isa. 42:8), Jesus is asserting His own deity.

Of course, Jesus raised Lazarus to relieve Mary and Martha’s grief and sorrow. But even above that, He raised Lazarus to show in a most powerful way that He is the resurrection and the life (11:25). Here’s the lesson: *God’s glory takes priority even above our comfort and relief from trials!* So in any decision, ask, “Which course of action will bring the most glory to God?” We can’t always control the outcome of our decisions, but we should aim to make God look good, as He really is.

- (2) Jesus made decisions based on walking in the light of God’s purposes (11:9-10).

When the disciples warned Jesus about the danger of returning to Judea (11:8), He replied (11:9-10), “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”

True to John’s style of writing, Jesus’ words have several levels of meaning. In the first place, the twelve hours of daylight referred to the time when a man could work. “Night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4). Thus Jesus was saying that God has appointed a certain amount of time for Him (or anyone) to work, and no one can touch Him before that time has ended.

Second, there is also the thought that as long as Jesus, the Light of the world, is present, men should make the most of it. He

will soon be taken from them. In other words, make the most of opportunities to serve God while you can.

Third, there is the idea that to be with Jesus is to be in the light; to be away from Him is to be in the darkness and thus subject to stumbling. So as we've seen, it's better to go with Jesus into a place of danger than to be without Him in a place of seeming safety. While Thomas was rather pessimistic (11:16), he was right: It's better to die with Jesus than to live without Him.

- (3) Jesus made decisions based on helping others come to faith and/or grow in faith (11:15, 25-26, 42, 45).

This story is all about building each person's faith in Jesus. The disciples already believed in Jesus, but their faith needed to grow. So Jesus makes what at first sounds like an outrageous statement (11:14b-15), "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe." Jesus wasn't glad that Lazarus was dead, but He was glad for this situation because it would result in greater faith for the disciples.

Also, to the grieving Martha, Jesus states (11:25-26), "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Carson points out (*ibid.*, p. 412), "Jesus' concern is to divert Martha's focus from an abstract belief in what takes place on the last day, to a personalized belief in him who alone can provide it." If we believe in Jesus, we have eternal life here and now. And, though we will die physically, we will live with Jesus spiritually without interruption. To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). When He comes again, our bodies will be raised in immortality. Jesus pointedly asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" He wanted Martha (and us) to believe in Him, but also to believe certain truths about Him.

Also, when Jesus prays aloud at the tomb of Lazarus (11:42), He states plainly that He did so in order that the people standing around the tomb would believe that the Father had sent Him. Thus one of His main aims in waiting before coming to raise Lazarus was to bring some to saving faith and to strengthen the faith of those who already believed in Him. That should be a factor in our decisions about how to spend our time: will it increase our faith

and the faith of other believers? And, will it bring others who do not yet believe to saving faith?

Eleven years ago, there was mass fear-mongering about what might happen when the calendar turned to January 1, 2000. Many predicted massive catastrophes: power outages, plane crashes, economic chaos, and worse. A man in this church who had been the CIA director for Europe was sure that there would be an unprecedented meltdown.

About this time, I got an unusual invitation to speak at a retreat for college students over Y2K in a remote village in the Czech Republic. As I considered what to do, I thought, "It would require faith in God to go. Staying home doesn't require much faith." So we trusted God and went and had a great time with those students.

So Jesus' life counted for God because He lived in submission to God's purposes in light of eternity. He did what He did to further God's glory by bringing people to saving faith and to deeper faith in Him as Lord. We can apply Jesus' motives and actions to our lives:

2. Our lives will count for God if we live in submission to His purposes in light of eternity.

Let me give you three broad applications, with some more specific action points under the third one:

- A. Make sure that you are in submission to God and His will.

This is the starting point of moving from wasting your life to making your life count for eternity. This is both an initial decision and an ongoing renewed commitment. You come to a point where you recognize that Jesus is the Lord God, who gave Himself on the cross to redeem you from your sins. So you yield everything that you are to all of Christ that you know. But as you walk with Christ, His Word reveals areas of your life that you have not yet yielded to Him. And you grow to know more of who Christ is, which results in yielding more of yourself to Him.

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul wrote, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be trans-

formed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." As I said, presenting yourself as a living and holy sacrifice is an initial commitment, but also a frequently renewed one, because as some wag put it, "Living sacrifices have a way of crawling off the altar!"

The main question to answer is, "Who is Jesus Christ?" If He is the one sent by God (11:42), who can call a rotting corpse back to life, and who willingly went to the cross as the sacrifice for my sins, then I'd better believe in Him and yield all of my life to Him.

The response of the Jewish leaders to the news that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead was not only irrational and stupid; it was suicidal. First, they planned to kill Jesus (11:53). Then, they planned to kill Lazarus, "because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus" (12:11). Isn't that absurd! First, they want to kill the one who has the power over death. Then they want to kill the one that He raised from the dead. They succeeded in killing Jesus, but the grave couldn't hold Him. Their stubborn hardness of heart only resulted in their own eternal condemnation. So if you want your life to count for God, submit every area of your life to Jesus as Lord. Repeat as necessary!

B. Keep in tune with the Father.

Jesus knew the will of the Father because He walked closely with the Father. There are no magic formulas for knowing God's will. To use your time wisely so that you do the will of the Father, spend much time with Him in the Word and in prayer.

C. Prayerfully establish and maintain godly priorities.

Jesus accomplished so much in so little time because He had clear objectives for what He was doing. He told us clearly about these objectives so that we can follow in His steps:

(1) Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness.

Jesus gave this command in the context of worrying about money (Matt. 6:33): "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." To keep that objective in place requires constant fine tuning and much prayer to figure out how to apply it. But it's pretty clear, isn't it!

(2) Love God and love others.

Jesus boils everything down to these two great commandments (Matt. 22:37-39): Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Keep your relationship with God fresh and real. Spend time often in the Word and in prayer. And focus on your responsibility to love others as Christ has loved you (John 13:34; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 John 4:7-21; etc.). Don't forget that your closest neighbor isn't the guy next door. It's those you live with. Love should begin in our homes with kind words and selfless service.

(3) Ask God to give you a few people whom you can help come to know Him and to grow in Him.

That's what Jesus was doing here. He wanted the crowds to come to believe in Him as the Savior sent by the Father. He wanted the disciples and Mary and Martha to believe in a deeper way. Jesus mainly poured Himself into a few and sent them to do the same with others. That was Paul's strategy, too (2 Tim. 2:2). Let it be yours and you will not waste your life.

### Conclusion

When Jonathan Edwards was 19-20, he wrote out 70 resolutions to govern his life. Number 5 was, "*Resolved*, Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can." Number 17 was, "*Resolved*, That I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:xx-xxi).

If you live through 2011, you have about 2,920 hours of free time. Don't waste them! Live in submission to God's purposes in light of eternity.

## Application Questions

1. Do you have a written purpose statement for your life and some written goals to move you toward that purpose? Do it!
2. As you think over 2010, what was your most productive use of your time in light of eternity? What was your biggest time waster? How can you plan to change this?
3. How can you know the proper balance between necessary "down time" and using your time for eternal purposes? Was Jonathan Edwards too "driven"?
4. What do you do to stay fresh in your love for God? How can you improve in this area in the New Year?

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